

LACY A. WRIGHT, JR.

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: January 6, 1998

Copyright 1999 ADST

[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Wright]

Q: Today is the 6th of January, 1998. This is an interview with Lacy A. Wright, Jr. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Lacy and I are old colleagues from Vietnam. Lacy, let's start at the beginning. Can you tell me where and when you were born and something about your family.

WRIGHT: I was born in Springfield, Illinois, on July 1, 1940. I was the first of five children, all boys. My mother was born in Springfield; my father was born not very far away, about 175 miles away in West Frankfort, Illinois. And I grew up, I spent my entire youth in Springfield, leaving to go to college, and I've not lived there since.

Q: What was your father doing?

WRIGHT: My father worked for the Allis Chalmers tractor company, which at that time had a large plant in Springfield.

Q: I assume your mother, having five boys, was occupied raising five boys.

WRIGHT: That's right. She never worked in the sense that women work today. She stayed home and raised her children.

Q: You went to elementary and high school?

WRIGHT: I went to Catholic schools. I went to a Catholic grade school, St. Peter and Paul's, which had a German tradition, probably still the best school for the money that I ever went to in my life. I shouldn't say "for the money" because it cost a dollar a month tuition, and it was a superb school. I went then to a boys' high school in Springfield, and then I studied to be a priest. I went into the seminary in Springfield for a year, then to Chicago for three years, and then I studied in Rome for a couple of years before I dropped out of that and came back to the United States.

Q: Well, going back to the elementary and, particularly, the high school area, were you getting much in the way of foreign affairs or something in which you would become much involved later on as a Foreign Service officer? Were you getting anything in that?

WRIGHT: I would not say too much. In the Midwest in those days, and I think that it may not have changed all that much even now, there was a tremendous concentration on domestic affairs. I can remember in my 30's talking to one of the officers on the Chicago Tribune. He told me that even in that very well known paper the space devoted to foreign affairs was tiny as opposed to domestic affairs. So I think that that outlook obtained throughout my youth. I did not even become aware of the Foreign Service until I went to Rome to study, and then I had a friend who knew somebody in the American embassy, and that was my first contact with embassies and with the Foreign Service.

Q: In high school, what did you read and what were your interests?

WRIGHT: I was interested in plays. I was interested in literature. There was a tremendous emphasis on sports in those days, and I was interested in a minor way in playing and in a major way in being a follower and a spectator, but those were the days when for example in my milieu there could be nothing more magnificent that could happen to a human being but that he would go to Notre Dame and play football. That was the acme. And places farther afield, Harvard and other Ivy League schools were way out somewhere in the firmament.

Q: Was high school a Catholic school?

WRIGHT: It was. It was run by a small order of priests called the Viatorians, who were centered, I believe in Chicago. Our school was about 400 students at that time, and in retrospect, I think they did a good job.

Q: Did you find in later life that being brought up in a Parochial school was parochial in its aspect, or were you getting a pretty good basis or broader view of the world.

WRIGHT: I think we got the basics for a good view of the world. We certainly learned basics in the sense of having a superb foundation in the English language, which is rarer and rarer today. I suppose where we might have been deficient was in critical thinking, in the sense that Catholicism, particularly as it was practiced in those days, is a religion which knows all the answers, at least to all the important questions, and so there was no impetus coming from one's teachers to be critical about the things that were taught by the church. And I suppose that that must be seen as a deficiency of that kind of education.

Q: One hears about "Jesuitical" education, which is one of examining things, which is a different approach from what I gather you were taught, or is it the same side of the coin?

WRIGHT: Well, I think the Jesuits like to perpetuate the view that what they have is peculiar and special, but I'm not sure that it really is. The Jesuits had a longer period of education than other priests did, and they produced a number of very [fine] scholars, and they prided themselves on that kind of emphasis. However, they, as other Catholics, believed essentially in the same things-totally in the same things. I think that they as a group put more emphasis on the scholarly and, as I say, were active in perpetuating the view that they were awfully darn good at it. Some of them were, and some of them less so. But I wouldn't want to exaggerate the differences between what might be called a Jesuitical approach and what was the approach of other Catholics.

Q: Well then, after high school you say you went to seminary. Where was that?

WRIGHT: I went first to a local one-year school called the Diocesan Latin School. This was an institution which was run by the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois, which had a very small enrollment, perhaps, oh, between ten and 20 students at any one time, and we then after completing that year, which was, by the way, devoted almost totally to the learning of Latin, because in those days, this would have been 1959, when you went to what was called the "major" seminary-that is, what we would call college or university-many of the courses were literally taught in Latin. The teachers spoke in Latin, and so you couldn't take those unless your Latin was up to a certain standard. So most of that year was spent learning Latin. There was some Greek and there were a few other things, but primarily Latin.

Q: By the way, while you were still in Springfield, did one get a heavy dose of Lincoln there? I was just wondering. I never knew anybody who came up from Springfield.

WRIGHT: Yes and no. I guess it's akin to living in New York and having somebody ask you if you're an expert on the Empire State Building. You probably aren't. Of course, we knew, I guess, a little bit more about Lincoln than other people, but I would not by any means say that being from Springfield entitles you to discourse about Abraham Lincoln. At the same time, he's always, to me, been a great president and a fascinating character, and I try to take whatever chances I have to learn more about him.Q: So where did you go then for your major education?

WRIGHT: I went to Chicago or, more specifically, to a town above Chicago called Mundelein, Illinois, which is near Libertyville, where Adlai Stevenson comes from, a town of, I don't know, 10,000 to 30,000. And the main feature of which in those days was a very large-indeed grandiose in its grounds- seminary belonging to the Archdiocese of Chicago. That was a much larger institution, and it accepted students not only from Chicago but from elsewhere in Illinois. It had been founded by Cardinal Mundelein, hence the name, and it was essentially two schools in one. It was the final three years of one's Philosophy, and at the end of that you got a B.A. in philosophy. And then you went on, if you stayed at Mundelein, for four years in theology, at the end of which you were ordained a priest.

Q: What was the Archdiocese of Chicago? I'm not a Catholic, but I went to school for a while to Boston University, and you got very much aware of what the archdiocese is in Boston, a rather autocratic, very Irish tradition at that time. Were you picking up any of the spirit of the Archdiocese of Chicago at that point?

WRIGHT: Yes, and it was more or less as you describe it. It was a very conservative institution. Indeed, most of Chicago Catholicism was very conservative, but in those days, as I'm sure the same exists today, with the number of people, students and others, who were much more progressive and who were trying to do things in a new way, particularly in the social field... Don't forget that in a few years you would have Pope John XXIII and the Vatican II council with a number of new ideas coming out of that which would both change the liturgy of the Church (for example, do away with the Latin mass) and impinge upon the social teaching of the Church. For example, I remember when I was at Mundelein, or maybe this was a little bit after that, one of the things that then went on was the civil rights movement in the South. And I can remember that one of my classmates, a year ahead of me, by the name of Dick Morrisrow, went to the South and marched at one of those places-Selma or one of the others-and was shot by police or a local law enforcement officer and very badly wounded. And I've not seen him in many years, but I'm told that he carries those wounds around to this day and was very fortunate not to have been killed.

Q: You left Mundelein when, in what year?

WRIGHT: I left Mundelein in 1962. That is, I did not finish my theology at Mundelein, but I was sent instead by the Archdiocese of Springfield to complete my studies in Rome at the North American College there.

Q: Why this change?

WRIGHT: It was considered an honor to be sent to Rome. The North American College in Rome is a creation of the American Church; that is, it is supported by all of the dioceses in the United States. At that time, it had about 300 to 400 students from all over the United States, and it was traditional that dioceses would send up to two students a year to Rome. For example, that's what Chicago did. Chicago was a large archdiocese; they sent two people. A smaller diocese, like mine, Springfield, didn't necessarily send somebody every year, but it did in that year.

Q: You were there in Rome from '62 to-

WRIGHT: -'65, when I quit.

Q: '62 to '65. When did Pope John XXIII come in?

WRIGHT: It was probably 1959 that he came in.

Q: Some of the changes were beginning to take hold at this point, weren't they?

WRIGHT: Don't forget, though, that Vatican II had not occurred yet. Vatican II did not occur until, I believe, 1962, and John XXIII, by the way, only reigned, I think, for about five years.

Q: I was going to say, it was a short but extremely influential reign. As a political officer, you were there at a very interesting time, and what was your impression of the impression of these doings on you and your fellow theological seminarians.

WRIGHT: Well, there was a tremendous amount of interest in what was going on at the council, and our college was only a stone's throw, literally, from St. Peter's and the Vatican, where these meetings were held. And during our time there, when these meetings were in session, all of the bishops of the world came, and so every student there had as a visitor his own bishop or archbishop or cardinal. Some of the more illustrious of them stayed in the North American College. I believe Cardinal Spellman stayed there.

Q: From New York.

WRIGHT: From New York. Cardinal Cushing of Boston also, and other notable people from the American Church. And they would speak to us, from time to time, in our college, and so it was a time of a great deal of intellectual ferment. I would say that a lot of this had to do with things that many people would consider esoteric, if not frivolous, but they were things that were of a lot of importance to people who were going to make their careers in the Church. Much of it was liturgical, for example.

Q: Were you sensing problems with your teachers, who were basically trained to teach one way and while the revolution was almost happening a stone's throw away? I mean, was this a problem?

WRIGHT: I guess it was a bit of a problem. Our teachers were, by the way, famous Jesuits. We did not go to school at the North American College. That was residence. We went to school at the Gregorian University, which is still there and which is a Jesuit-run institution and one of the most well endowed, intellectually, and best all-around of the Catholic seminaries in the world. But, as you imply, it was by and large a conservative institution with, however, smatterings of progressivity as well. There were, of course, a lot of struggles. These were played out right in the council itself, struggles between, say, the Italian bishops, who were by and large very conservative, and others, like the French, who were by and large much more liberal, much more willing to change and adapt themselves to the times. Within the American Church you had the same thing. You had a majority, I would say, of the hierarchy that was conservative, but there were a number of others who were not. So this kind of struggle between the old and the new was being played out all over the place.

Q: Looking at this-I don't know whether you could at the time-was there any feeling of difference between being an American Catholic candidate for priesthood, a French, and Italian-I mean, you were seeing others who were coming to their various schools from around there-was there much mixing, was there any, sort of, either ranking or putting them on a Catholic spectrum or what have you?

WRIGHT: There was a good deal of mixing. Most of us were anxious, for example, to learn Italian, so we would pair up with an Italian who wanted to learn English. Same in French, same in some of the other languages. So there was a great willingness to mix. There was a great desire to learn. After all, we were young people; we were in a different country, so there was a great desire to learn about what went on elsewhere. And I think that was reciprocated with the other students. One interesting sidelight was that we, coming from the United States-and I believe this is carried over into our diplomacy and into our general behavior-we tend to be the people who obeyed the laws and the rules the best. The Italian clergy and students, perhaps because familiarity breeds contempt, were often out of uniform, often obeyed the rules in the breach, but not the Americans. And I believe that we were considered by some naïf¹/₂ve to have taken that general approach, but we did. And again, I think that is something, though, that I saw then played out again and again in our diplomatic establishments, where we took local law a good deal more seriously than the locals did.

Q: I know exactly what you mean. Well, as this went on, after Vatican II, were there changes in your training?

WRIGHT: I would not say that there were a lot of direct changes, although I must say that I haven't thought about this before. Certainly there were changes going on, for example, in the way that Biblical studies were carried out, which I'm sure owed a lot to the spirit of what was going on at the council. There were new interpretations of the Bible; there was, of course, a great flight from the fundamentalist view that takes the Bible literally, although I don't know that you could attribute that to what was going on at the council, but it was the same direction, it was the same spirit that prevailed there. And I think that that was played out also in the teaching of moral theology and in a number of the other subjects that were taught at the Gregorian. So yes, I think you could, in that sense, say that the spirit that prevailed then was finding its way into the way courses were taught.

Q: During this period, were you getting any preparation for parish life? I'm thinking of the social service-psychology, bookkeeping, particularly what I'll call the delivery of social services, which later became a large part of what happened particularly in Latin American, all that.

WRIGHT: I would say not very much, and I would say that that's part of the old order that was still around, and I would suspect that that has changed a lot today. You got some, however, that is, some nod in the direction of giving you some practical training that you might need later. There were programs for newly ordained priests and those about to be ordained, whereby they would go to parishes in Rome and work on a Sunday and conduct certain activities, that kind of thing. As far as any kind of practical psychological training, I would say not; and that has to be seen as a deficiency of the old way that things were done. It was assumed that if you learned what the church's teachings were, you would pick all that stuff up along the way, a view that's now regarded as antiquated.

Q: What caused you to move away from the profession of the priesthood?

WRIGHT: Well, I would say that, in general, the life of a priest is a very odd one, odd in the sense that it is out of step with people who lead so-called normal lives. The most striking instance of this, of course, is that priests lead celibate lives, and that alone is enough to drive most people who leave away from that calling. However, I would say that, although it's extremely important and, indeed, the most important aspect of what I'm talking about, it's a broader phenomenon when you're in this kind of life, and especially when you're a young person and you are very keen to be doing the kinds of things that other people are doing and when you're starting out in life and wanting to experiment with things. So I would say that, in general, it was the uncommon, the odd quality of the life that priests were called upon to lead, the separate nature of it as symbolized most strikingly in the question of celibacy.

Q: Was this happening to almost the same percentage each year, who would drift away, or was this a spirit of the times? We're talking about the '60's now, and things were really beginning to shake up all over the place.

WRIGHT: Something new was happening. Now, I don't have any statistics here to buttress what I'm saying, but you always had a very large number of people who would leave during their training, as I did. What became new, I would say starting with those classes, was the departure of a number of priests, people who had already been ordained and then decided to leave. So for example, in my class, many of the members of which I keep up with, let us say there were maybe 100 people ordained at the end in Rome, or perhaps fewer, 70, let's say; well over 50 per cent of those have now left the priesthood. That would not have been the case 50 or 75 years ago.

Q: While you were in Rome, were your eyes and interests turning elsewhere? It obviously was a tremendous crisis of the soul, and all. I'm not being facetious on this; it really is. But was something else tugging you towards what you wanted to do with yourself?

WRIGHT: I would say not. I would say that I was so tied up in the question that you just alluded to, that is, whether to go or whether to stay, that it crowded out a lot of other things. However, at the same time, I was learning new things. I was becoming more and more enamored of the life of travel, of learning languages, and then shortly before I left Rome, I met some people from the American embassy and became aware of diplomacy and the Foreign Service. So I think that despite my preoccupation with my own problems, other things were creeping in that would later prove influential in what I did.

Q: Were you at all aware of Papal diplomacy at the time, or was that just way off somewhere else?

WRIGHT: Both. It was way off somewhere else, but I was aware of it, in fact, because I had a very close friend, an American, who was studying in the Vatican diplomatic school. So I was aware that there was such a place, and I knew one or two of the people who went there.

Q: When did you leave the North American school?

WRIGHT: I left in May of 1965, and I went back to Illinois. I went home first, and then I went Chicago, and my aim was to continue my schooling, and I can't quite remember whether at that point I wanted to go into the Foreign Service, but I may have. And I went to school that summer at Loyola University, and I took foreign affairs kinds of course, and then I taught high school the following year at a Catholic high school on the North Side of Chicago and also continued to go to school part time. And then during that year I took the Foreign Service exam and I passed it.

Q: I'm just going on supposition, but I would have thought that studying Latin, studying theology and all-I mean, in a way it seems like a very narrow band of studies, and the Foreign Service exam is designed to have somebody with a broad superficial knowledge and not a concentrated knowledge. How did you bring yourself up to speed? Were you doing reading on the side? How did this come about?

WRIGHT: Well, I was doing my best. As I say, I was taking some foreign affairs courses in the months leading up to that. I was doing my best to prepare for the exams, although that was not very easy because of the quality of the exam which you just mentioned, but somehow I did it. One of the interesting things, when the results of the written part of the exam came back, was that I didn't pass any of the parts by very much. Some of that didn't surprise me. What did surprise me was that the area where I thought I was really pretty super in, which is English, I also didn't pass by much. But at any rate, I did pass.

Q: Had you during your studies been exposed to the daily newspapers? I mean, was this part of your reading?

WRIGHT: No, and in fact, one of the features of life at Mundelein, which is hard to comprehend today is that it was extremely isolated. There was no television; there was no radio, except for certain times of the day, I guess, although I don't remember listening to the radio. There was a very conscious attempt by the administration of the school to keep outside influences out. Now you could go to the library and sit around and read Time magazines from a year ago, if you wished, but the idea of following the news day by day didn't happen.

Q: This is such an important part of the pre-Foreign Service experience, in a way. Were you doing a lot of catching up, or did you just sort of start at a certain point and then keep up from then on?

WRIGHT: Well, I think I started at a certain point and then kept up from then on. But there were, as your question brings out, huge gaps in my knowledge. As I look back on that education, I think that whatever you do you benefit from, and I benefited from the things that I studied. But I think that I paid a high price in terms of the things that I was not able to study during those years, and that that was kind of cost of doing business in the line that I was in.

Q: I take it from the fact that you were teaching in a Catholic high and that you were going to Loyola and all, the fact that you had left the seminary and all this did not put you on the wrong side of the Church or anything like that.

WRIGHT: Well, it did not initially, although over the next several years I did drift away from belief in the Church.

Q: You were in Chicago from '65 to '67?

WRIGHT: Exactly.

Q: The big convention of '68 had not happened, but there was a lot of stuff in the '60's leading up to that. I'm talking about the young generation of the '60's, which you were a member of. Was that beginning to get to you, too?

WRIGHT: Well, there was a lot of ferment in those days. In fact, I can remember coming back to Chicago for a visit right after the conventions of 1968 and talking to people about it. And many of the ideas that were current at that time, the anti-authoritarian ideas-were ones that I shared or vaguely shared. But I would say that for most of the time that I was there... Oh, and by the way, I've neglected to say that after I passed the Foreign Service exam I went back to school because I was not able to go into the Foreign Service right away. I went to the University of Chicago, and I was there for, I think, four quarters, and I studied international relations there, after passing the Foreign Service, but before going into the Foreign Service.

Q: When did you take the oral examination?

WRIGHT: Let's see, I took the written exam at the end of 1966, and then I took the oral exam about three or four months later.

Q: Do you remember anything about the oral exam? The type of questions?

WRIGHT: Oh, yes, I certainly do.

Q: I always like to capture this as much as possible. Would you tell me your experiences?

WRIGHT: Well, it was a very intimidating experience. There were, I believe, three examiners. I don't remember their names now. This occurred in Chicago; I guess it was at the Federal Building. It lasted about two hours, and the entire exam, as I remember it, consisted of oneself sitting across the table from these three examiners, and they asked you questions. None of them were questions that could be answered yes or no, and none of them were questions that could be answered with a definite solution. They were all open-ended questions. I remember one of them that had to do with, I believe, Mark Twain. The examiner told me that I had mentioned Mark Twain and told me to imagine that I was in front of a class and I had been asked to talk about Mark Twain and about his place in literature, about his effect on the Midwest, and several other aspects. And he said, "Well, just imagine you're there. What would you say?" That's an example of the kind of thing that you were asked. I remember another thing that I was asked was "Name the five most serious economic problems in the United States today," a question that I did not answer very well, and I remember that when I was called back into the room and told that I had passed the exam, one of the examiners said something like, "Mr. Wright, you know you don't exactly shine in economics. That perhaps is something you should focus on."

Q: I had the same thing happen to me when I took mine back in '55, I think. I was given the same advice. You were not a complete oddball, but you were not coming out of the political science courses at Harvard or Princeton or something. Was there any emphasis or concern about how you'd do in this sort of thing with your background in the Church and all that?

WRIGHT: Concern on the part of whom?

Q: The examiners. Were they examining this aspect of your life?

WRIGHT: I don't remember any references to that effect. I had the impression that they took a look at me and asked me the same kind of things that they would have asked anybody else.

Q: Sometimes exams are tailored to a person, just to touch on it, to see how they would react and all that.

WRIGHT: One thing, by the way, that I did not find in the exam were any sort of trick questions or trick situations that they tried to put me in, which was one of the things that everybody who took the exam during that period was warned about. They would ask you to sit down, and there would be no chair, and so on.

Q: Or you'd be given water in a dribble glass.

WRIGHT: Exactly.

Q: Or offered a cigarette and there was no ashtray. You know, I heard all these things, and at one point I gave the oral exam, and we made a great point of telling them that we weren't going to play these games. What brought you to the Foreign Service? Was it seeing the sights of Rome, because a lot of people go to Rome and stay there and don't join the Foreign Service?

WRIGHT: Well, the Foreign Service, I think, seemed to embody all the things that I was interested in. I already liked languages. Even at Mundelein I studied languages, three of them at a time. I like to travel. I was fascinated with foreign countries. I had the vague idea in my mind that diplomacy was a world of glamour and interest and, possibly, minor intrigue, and all that was appealing. And so from what I knew of the Foreign Service, all that I knew of the Foreign Service I liked, and there was no other competing attraction in my ken at that time. Now what I would have done had I not passed the Foreign Service exam is a good question. I don't know.

Q: I think that's true of many of us. Teaching is always one of the... When did you actually come into the Foreign Service?

WRIGHT: I came in right at the beginning of 1968.

Q: You took the A100 course, the basic officers' course?

WRIGHT: Right.

Q: Could you characterize the people you came in with in that course?

WRIGHT: They were a varied lot, I would say, which puts me in mind of an observation that I've often made, which is that despite the fact that the Foreign Service exam is very difficult and weeds out a lot of very good people, it also appears to admit a certain number of people who are not really suited to the Foreign Service and, in fact, don't stay very long. And I think that was true of the people I was with. On the other hand, we also had a number of people who have had outstanding careers and become ambassadors, and some of them are still in the Foreign Service.

Q: When you took the A100 course, about the spring of '68, I guess, you were ready to go out. Did you know where you wanted to go, or did you have any thoughts?

WRIGHT: Yes, I had one thought: I did not want to go to Vietnam. And it was a very common thought at the time, one shared by most of my classmates.

Q: What was the situation, as far as the Foreign Service was concerned, with Vietnam in the spring of '68? Let's see, the Tet Offensive had just taken place, and we were talking about sort of getting the hell out.

WRIGHT: The Tet Offensive had just taken place, and I'm trying to think whether I was assigned to Vietnam before or during or just after the Tet Offensive. Anyway, it was one of the things that put the fear of God into all of us. You were back here studying either with the prospect of going to Vietnam or just having been assigned to Vietnam. I suppose the Tet Offensive occurred in February and then there was, I believe, a "mini"-Tet Offensive in May, and probably it was during the interim that I was assigned to Vietnam. But I can assure you that I did not want to go to Vietnam, partially because I was scared and didn't want to get killed, and partially because I thought that what we were doing was wrong. And I suspect that most of the people in my class felt pretty much the same way.

Q: What was the policy towards Vietnam at that time by the Foreign Service personnel?

WRIGHT: Well, we were in the process of sending large numbers of Foreign Service officers to Vietnam, many of them on their first tour. I often tell junior officers today who find themselves in consular sections, to their great dislike, that when I came into the Foreign Service our equivalent of the consular section was to be sent to Vietnam.

Q: When you were assigned that, what process did you go through? Did you take the language?

WRIGHT: Yes. First of all, most of us did go to Vietnam. We were assigned to Vietnam. I think, by and large, the people who did not have to go to Vietnam were women, although one or two of them volunteered to go to Vietnam and did go, and people with some kind of an advanced degree, and it was thought that this qualified them to do something more elevated and meaningful, so they didn't have to go to Vietnam either. Then again, I don't know what the figures are, but I believe that over half of us in our class were sent to Vietnam.

Q: How long did you take Vietnamese?

WRIGHT: Ten months.

Q: Did that include area studies and all?

WRIGHT: Yes, it included area studies, and these, or at least some aspects of them, by the way, were often resisted by the people who were in the courses because they were of real uneven quality. We had people who were real scholars in the language and the country who would come and talk to us, and then we had a lot of other people who were looked upon as mouthpieces for the administration, who didn't seem to know a lot about Vietnam but were cheerleaders to urge us along to go over there and do our part.

Q: Were you a combined group at that time. I mean, were there people from AID and USIA, military?

WRIGHT: Yes, that's right. Now I'm trying to picture in my mind my classes. Anyway, the short answer is yes. I was going to say that there were not many military, but that's not right. There were a lot of military officers who studied Vietnamese with us.

Q: You've always enjoyed languages. How did you fit with Vietnamese?

WRIGHT: I did all right. I think I had a 3/3 at the end, although when I got there I did not learn to speak Vietnamese as well as a lot of the people I had gone to school with, because they were sent out to the field to live in provinces or districts, whereas I went to the embassy political section as a so-called provincial reporter, so I had less opportunity to practice than they did. But anyway, I got to the point where I could do my job with my language, but a number of these people who really lived night and day with the Vietnamese became superb at it.

Q: Well, now, you were in Vietnam this time from late '68?

WRIGHT: Spring of '69. I went there in March of '69.

Q: And you were there until when?

WRIGHT: I was there until September of '70, the first time.

Q: Let's concentrate on this first part first. When you got out in the first part of '69, what were your jobs?

WRIGHT: I was attached to the political section of the embassy, and in that very large section, there was a sub-unit called the provincial reporting unit, and it was headed by a Foreign Service officer by the name of Nick Ford, who was later succeeded by Cal Maylert, and it was divided up according to the different corps in Vietnam. There were four corps. And there were two provincial reporting officers for each corps. I was assigned to Fourth Corps, which is the Mekong Delta, a fellow by the name of Dick Harrington and I. We were the two provincial reporters. We spent about half our time in Saigon and about half our time down in the Delta. We were both living in Can Tho, which was the Fourth Corps headquarters, the unofficial capital of the Delta, and our job was to go around the Delta, to its 16 provinces, and report on what we saw happening. We had a very vague mandate. We were sometimes given specific assignments by the head of our unit in Saigon, but often we weren't. Often we went to a place, and we looked around and tried to divine what was going on that would be of interest to the embassy and report it. We were quite free in what we were able to do. It was a marvelous job, marvelous.

Q: What was the situation in the '69-70 period in the Delta?

WRIGHT: At that time, the last American troops were leaving the Delta, that is, the last American ground troops, in the Ninth Division. The Ninth Division, which was based in My Tho, was packing up and leaving. And from that point forward, which is something that a lot of people don't realize, that is, from 1969, so for the last five and a half or so years of the war, there were no American ground troops in Fourth Corps. There was American air support, but by and large, the Vietnamese were fighting in the Delta in large part on their own.

Q: What was your impression of the Vietnamese leadership in the Delta at this time?

WRIGHT: I'm trying to think who the corps commander was then. I don't remember who was there then; however, the head of the Vietnamese Ninth Division then was a general by the name of General Di. I'll think of his full name in a second. He was regarded as a very good man-honest, hardworking. I can remember that during this period his picture appeared on the cover of the New York Times Magazine, a big cover story about him, but he was, I thought, and still do think, an example of a good officer, competent at what he was doing, with a sense of dedication, hard work and under terribly difficult conditions. General Di, by the way, now lives in Orlando, Florida. I spoke to him about a year ago on the telephone. He had just gotten out of Vietnam not very long before. He told me that he was among the last five or so South Vietnamese officers who were released by the Communists from prison. He spent something like 18 years in prison after the end.

But let me go back to your question. I think there were a number of officers, like General Di, who were extremely good men, operating under very adverse conditions, who were admirable. There were also, of course, a lot of the other kind; and there was a system of cronyism, and worse, in which all of these people had to operate. And I think it has to be said that, although there are many reasons why we lost the war, some of them our fault, had there been a greater level of dedication on the part of people in command in Vietnam, including a number of military officers, things also might have turned out differently.

Q: What was your impression of the lower level, of the province level, of the Vietnamese leadership there, and also the village level?

WRIGHT: It was mixed. You had examples of good, competent province chiefs with leadership qualities, and you had examples of the other kind, I'm afraid. And the fortunes of a province were determined in very large measure by the kind of leadership that it had. So I don't think it's saying anything very profound. It goes without saying that when you have good leadership in a province or in a military unit you have good results.

Q: What about our various efforts in the region for both aid and advisors and all this? I mean the American side.

WRIGHT: It seems to me a number of our programs were successful. The Rural Development Banks, for example, introducing new strains of rice, road building-these were efforts which really introduced, even during the war, a new level of prosperity into the Delta. And in fact, don't forget that, I would say, from 1969 to 1973, things in the Delta, and I think in the rest of the country as well-although I'm less acquainted with that-were going awfully well. The theory is that in 1968 in the Delta we were regarded as extremely dangerous. We're not so regarded during this '69-'73 period. A great deal was done to lift standards of living, and a great deal was done to clean areas of Viet Cong elements and to make life a lot more livable for people. It was not until, say, the spring of 1974, maybe a bit earlier, that things really started to deteriorate and move, kind of, inexorably toward the end, the fall of Saigon.

Q: During this '69-'70 period, was there much hostile action taking place in the Delta?

WRIGHT: Oh, yes, quite a bit. I can remember going to the military briefings every morning for different periods at IV Corps headquarters. These were in the form of a briefing to the commanding general, and I would say that on the big map, on an average morning, there would have been recorded maybe a hundred incidents. In some of them maybe no one would have been killed, or one person killed, and in the bigger ones maybe a hundred or two hundred people would have been killed. So there was a great deal of military activity going on, but these were not dramatic pitched battles, like you saw farther north in Khe Sanh and elsewhere. These were skirmishes between units or parts of units, but they were occurring every day of the year, just about.

Q: Were these North Vietnamese troops, or were they mostly Viet Cong?

WRIGHT: Mostly Viet Cong, although increasingly North Vietnamese troops as the end approached.

Q: We're still sticking to the '69-'70 period. In the late spring of 1970, there was the incursion into Cambodia. Did that have an effect in the Delta?

WRIGHT: I haven't thought about that particular question for a long time. I remember one effect it had was that there was a lot of looting done in Cambodia, and units were returning to South Vietnam loaded with stuff. I haven't thought about this for a long time, but I remember it was of such proportions that I can remember John Paul Vann being very unhappy about what was going on and speaking to the commanding general about it.

Q: Can we try to get a feel for the spirit within the political section in Saigon? In the first place, you've got this huge political section, now reporting more on local events than we probably have in any other country in the world ever. Was there a division between the young officers seeing it one way and older officers seeing it another, or any conflicts?

WRIGHT: Oh, sure. Yes, on the subject of corruption, which is usually what divides people in these kinds of situations, it certainly did then. There was great tendency on the part of older officers to take what they regarded as the longer, more culturally sensitive view, and to regard corruption as a perhaps unfortunate fact but nothing we should get overly worked up about, as opposed to the view of most of the younger people, including me, which was that corruption was something that got in the way of the war effort and that we ought to be more active in trying to suppress.

Q: Did you have a feeling that your reports that were coming in were being suppressed, doctored or what-have-you, as far as how it went up the chain of command and to Washington?

WRIGHT: It's a little bit hard to compare the two periods because in that first period we did not have consulates out in the field, so they were not doing any of the kind of reporting that they did later. But during the '69-'70 period-Ambassador Bunker was there-I would say that in both periods that I was there, '69-'70 and then '73 until the end, there was pretty heavy massaging of the reports that came out of the younger officers. I don't necessarily find total fault with that. I think in such a sensitive and complicated situation, it behooved the embassy to look carefully at what went out and not simply say, "Every man for himself. You can all report whatever it is you think you see happening." That, especially when you state it that way, would be an absurd position for an ambassador to take. But I think that in the doing of this, the bias of the older officers was in the direction which I have described, so some of what was being sent out of the embassy reflected this and was probably-when things like corruption were being discussed-not etched as finely as they might have been otherwise. At the same time, I would certainly not think that this, in itself, had any particular effect on the way Washington saw the war or the actions that we took. In fact, I think that the more you read about the history of the war, the more it's clear that the President and others high up in the succeeding Administrations had a very good idea of what was going on in Vietnam, warts and all. When they took particular decisions which might seem to ignore those facts, they took them for very different reasons. And so the more I read, the more it's clear to me that there was no dearth of knowledge about what was going in Vietnam in the top echelons of our government.

Q: Did you see a difference-here we're talking about the '69-'70 period-between what the American military was reporting and what the provincial reporters and others were reporting?

WRIGHT: Well, we reported in vastly different ways. First of all, most military reports are incomprehensible to the rest of us. They are often reports which fit into a format, so it's the format itself which determines what's going to come through in the report. There is little prose reporting, I think it's fair to say, and usually the prose is so horrendous that it can't be read anyway. I don't mean to be overly critical of military reporting, but I think that military reporting generally would not be set up to catch the kinds of things that we are talking about. It's not set up to report on corruption, and so on. Now again, that doesn't mean that military commanders sitting back in the Pentagon were ignorant of what was going on in Vietnam. I think there was so much that went on by word of mouth and in other ways that I doubt that most of the people sitting back here were ill informed-although I must say that when you read about people like General Westmoreland, I think that probably there were some misconceptions, maybe some big ones, about the way the war was going.

You know, Bill Colby had, I thought, a very good article in the Washington Post some months before his death, in which he said, among other things, that most of the histories written of the Vietnam War pretty much stopped at Tet '68, ignoring what went on later. His view was that, yes, we made terrible mistakes up until that point, but after it we corrected a number of them. And so that kind of reporting is like reporting the Second World War but stopping in 1943 or so. And so his view was that we had corrected a lot of the things that were wrong and that we, in our lives, were doing extremely well during much of that latter period, until we petered out and greatly slowed down our assistance.

Q: Did you find there was much reliance on what the CIA was doing, or was the CIA sort of doing its thing and the political section was doing its thing and the two didn't meet particularly?

WRIGHT: My sense is that we were both doing our thing. I guess they met up in the Ambassador's office, because he read both of them. There was so much reporting coming out of both sides. One of the features of the CIA reporting in those days was that the CIA station chief did periodically, maybe every month or six weeks or two months, his own assessment of the situation. And these were extremely well written, not always accurate, but extremely well written pieces which were fairly comprehensive in their picture of the situation, and there are things that I have not seen since written by the CIA station. And I suspect that when these well written pieces, seemingly comprehensive pieces, went back to Washington, they were regarded with some seriousness.

Q: You know, something I've heard a lot about are young officers like yourself, trained in Vietnamese, getting out in the provinces. Did the CIA have the same system of training people in Vietnamese, or were they more reliant on other sources?

WRIGHT: They trained some people in Vietnamese, but by and large, their people who were out in the provinces did not speak Vietnamese. These often tended to be people who were, say, former police officers-people who were brought in from outside to fill those positions. And they were not necessarily people who knew much about Vietnam, although some of them eventually stayed there a long time and could have been said to have a lot of experience in Vietnam. But I would say that, over all, their people did not tend to speak Vietnamese.

Q: I would assume in that situation it would have been a real detriment. I mean they would have been more dependent on-

WRIGHT: Yes, it tied them very closely to the Vietnamese who worked for them. They tended to have one of the things that the CIA did there, I think in pretty much every province during the height of their involvement, their own separate quarters, their own house, their own everything. It pretty much made a shambles of any attempt to pretend they were integrated into the rest of the establishment. And to make matters worse, they habitually referred to their quarters as the embassy. And this was standard-all over the Delta, certainly, and I'm sure all over the country-that if a stranger, Vietnamese or otherwise, came around looking for the embassy house, he would be pointed to the CIA house, which was unfortunate. But there was either little care, or perhaps it was inadvertence or incompetence, but little was done to create a situation where the CIA would be hard to find or would be integrated into the rest of the group.

Q: I noticed when I was in Saigon, at the same time you were in this period, '69-'70, that the CIA had their own guards, Nung guards, who looked different from others. So as soon as you'd go outside and you'd see a house, and here would be a Nung, a fairly big guy who doesn't look Vietnamese at all but Oriental, and you say, "Well, it has to be a CIA house."

WRIGHT: Exactly.

Q: So they didn't fly a flag, but they might as well have.

WRIGHT: I can remember when I was acting consul general, after 1973, in the Delta, at a certain point, the CIA told us it was sending someone down and that this person was to be unknown as a CIA operative but was to be integrated into the political section. And so I did my best to keep up my part of the bargain, and we prepared as best we could. We prepared an office for the person and everything, and it turned out when he arrived that the CIA station chief, first of all, decided he would go out personally to meet the man at the airport, which was a bit of a give-away. Many of the CIA people lived in a certain part, in front of the CORDs Club, and they all drove distinctive types of cars and they all had their names on their parking places in front of these little town houses that they occupied. I came to find out after the guy had arrived that they had painted his name right into one of these parking spots, right in front of where all of the CIA people lived. With that kind of attention to detail, going in the wrong direction, it's an example of what I think, by the way, is a fairly common phenomenon around the world, but which was really accentuated there. The agency often takes extremely inadequate steps to hide the identity of its people.

Q: When you left there in September of 1970, in your mind whither South Vietnam?

WRIGHT: I guess I thought that things were going okay. I didn't think the war was going to end any time soon. That turned out to be correct, I guess. But I don't know that I had any profound thoughts on the subject. I will say something else, though. I'd forgotten to tell you, during the 1969 to '70 period, that I really had two jobs. One of my jobs was, as I have described to you, one of the people in the provincial reporting unit. My other job, however, in Can Tho, was to be the Pol-Ad, or political advisor, to John Paul Vann.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

WRIGHT: And so, when I left Vietnam, in the fall of 1970, in retrospect, I believe I made a bad mistake, because I had gotten to know Vann pretty well by then. Vann asked me to stay and keep working for him. In retrospect, I wish I had.

Q: John Paul Vann was quite a character in the Vietnam situation. Could you tell me how you worked with him and your impression of what he was doing, again, sticking to the '69-'70 period?

WRIGHT: Well, first of all I wrote an article about this shortly before Vann's death for the Foreign Service Journal, if you're ever interested in it, in the Spring of 1973. I admired Vann greatly. Vann was a unique personality, unique abilities. I've not met his equal since then. He was even at the time I arrived somewhat larger than life, so I didn't know what to expect. And I would say during the first six months or so that I was there, Vann paid very little attention to me. He had not gotten along very well with my predecessor-no disrespect to my predecessor-for whatever reason. Vann had possibly regarded him as working for the embassy and not for him, Vann. But at any rate, I got to know Vann slowly, a little bit better as time wore on, and after a while, I would take trips with Vann and we would go places. And I got to know Vann, I think, for a newcomer, pretty well. Vann had his coterie of old friends, Colonel Carl Bernard, for example, others, that had been with him in Vietnam for a long time, and those were Colonel Wilbur Wilson, others. I can tell you many stories about Vann, many of them.

Q: Say what you'd like. It might give a little of the flavor, particularly when you were with him.

WRIGHT: Vann was a man who was tremendously ambitious, first of all. He had ideas about where he wanted to go. One of the things which Vann wanted very much to do was be senior advisor in a corps. Now there never were any senior advisors except military advisors, generals. When Vann arrived in IV Corps, he was the deputy for CORDs. He wanted to be number one. There was a deputy for CORDs, then there was a brigadier general, who was the deputy for the military side. And on top of that there was a two or three star general. Although that was a very big assignment-Vann had probably a couple of thousand Americans under him and who knows how many Vietnamese, so it was a big job-Vann was always looking for bigger jobs. And he was a great bureaucratic infighter. I can remember, at one point, the commanding general was going away on vacation, so there was a question of who would replace him, who would be the acting Corps senior advisor. And Vann got word, either formally or informally before the fact, that they were going to name the brigadier general acting senior advisor, even though he had been there a shorter time than Vann had. So Vann had, in his mind, seniority. I remember him saying to me, "You know, this is unacceptable. I should be the acting senior advisor, and if they won't make me acting senior advisor, it'll be all the more difficult some day to have that job." So Vann really made a big stink about it. He sent a letter-I forget whether it was to Saigon or to the commanding general-saying that if he were not made acting in the general's absence, he was quitting, and he said, "They'll have to do it. They'll have to give it to me because I'm too well known. They can't afford to have me resign, so I know if I take this stand it'll piss everybody off. They'll all be mad at me, but they'll do it." Which is what happened.

Vann was a man who took big risks with his life, with his career, everything, but they were well calibrated risks. He did not go off and do things mindlessly, although he did do things very dangerously. One time, I remember, I drove with Vann and a congressman, whose name I don't remember, down to Camau from Can Tho, the southernmost province town in the Delta, maybe a hundred miles or so. This had to be sometime in 1970. And this congressman was making a trip out there, like many of his colleagues had-he was by himself-and Vann said, "Okay, Congressman, we're going to drive to the Delta." And he made a point of dramatizing this. He said, "No U.S. Congressman has ever made this trip before." And while we were in the car, he said, "By the way, Congressman, my superiors don't know that I'm doing this, because if they did they would have stopped me." Anyway, we drove all the way down there, and I can remember, as we approached the province town, we ran smack into a military convoy of, I don't know, 10 or 20 trucks-big, huge military trucks-and we were on one of these small dirt roads, and there's not enough room for a truck and another car to pass, at least not safely, not the way these guys were driving. Well, these guys were used to driving any way they wanted, and when a South Vietnamese military convoy got on one of these roads, they simply expected everybody else to get off. They drove right down the center of the road, and everybody else was supposed to get off. So we approached the convoy, and the convoy starts whizzing past us, and all of them trying to wave us off the road. Vann was driving. We had a driver with us, but Vann, when he was outside of the city, always insisted on driving himself, didn't trust his drivers, didn't trust him to make the right moves if there were danger. So Vann was driving. This really irritated Vann, and after several of these trucks had whizzed by us, all of them motioning to us to get off the road, Vann brought his car to a halt right in the center of the road so that the next guy couldn't get by, and he sat there, and he said, "Lacy, go tell that guy in that lead truck who I am, and tell him that as soon as I get to Camau I'm going to speak to his commanding general." So that was my assignment. I forget what I said, but at any rate, that was the kind of thing. Vann was supremely self-confident.

I'll tell you another thing that happened along the same road at a different time. We were driving along, out in the middle of nowhere, out in the middle of the rice paddies, and we passed a little shack on the side of the road. Vann stopped the car-he was driving, just he and I-and he said, "Lacy, would you mind going in that hut there and asking if they have my glasses?" He said, "When I was coming by here about six months ago, I was driving my mo-" [end of tape]

He told me to go to the shack, ask for his glasses, and then he told me he had been there about six months before, riding his motorcycle, all by himself, and he had come upon another South Vietnamese convoy, and he had gotten off the road for the convoy to pass. He had noticed that there were Viet Cong nearby and they were laying an ambush, and he looked up and he saw a South Vietnamese convoy approaching, so he knew what the ambush was for. So he got off his motorcycle. He waved frantically at the oncoming convoy to warn them of this danger, but to no avail. They rushed right by him. As I recall this, I don't believe then there was an ambush, or at least they got by. The problem was that once they were by it, John Paul Vann was there on the road looking across at all these guys who had been about to lay the ambush. So, he said, he fled on foot across the rice fields, and he ran into this house trying to hide. And the people were scared, petrified, and asked him to leave. And it was then that he got out of the rice paddy, ran the other direction, finally came upon a South Vietnamese outpost, told them what had happened, radioed in and was able to get out of the area. But at any rate, he told me that he thought that when he was in that house he had left his glasses there, so he asked me to go in and look for them. And I did, and I went in and I asked if they had John Paul Vann's glasses, and they said, no, they did not, and I left.

Vann was a man who-this was one side of him-took chances. He did this, he said, in order really to find out what was going on. For example, once a week, John Vann, the deputy for CORDs, would go out and spend the night at a lonely outpost somewhere in the Delta-once a week, all night. Vann, by the way, got very little sleep. He told me he routinely slept four hours a night. So he would do that. And by virtue of doing this, by virtue of every day being all over the Delta, once a week staying the night with a bunch of 17-year-old soldiers out in the middle of nowhere, he knew the Delta like the back of his hand. He knew all the units; he knew who was sleeping with whose wife among the Vietnamese military; he knew everything. And certainly, some of that could not have occurred if he had not done these kinds of things, some of which were dangerous.

Q: What was the impression of Vann? We're still talking about the '69-'70 period. You were with him from time to time. You'd come back and how was he seen at the embassy, by the political section and others who'd come up to you, "What are you doing with that wild man?" What was their-

WRIGHT: Yes, there was some of that, yes. I would say the higher up you went in the hierarchy, the more distrust there was of Vann, although there was a lot of, I think, grudging admiration for Vann as well. The person who distrusted him most, apparently, was Ambassador Bunker. Vann told me that Bunker almost threw him out of the country at one point. Vann had become friendly with a man named Tung Ngoc Chiao, and Tung Ngoc Chiao was, or later became, a Lower House deputy. He was from the Delta. His brother was a well known Viet Cong officer, and the authorities were going to arrest Chiao for having fraternized-if you'll forgive the expression-with his brother, been in contact with him. Vann thought that this was totally unjust and that he was being made the scapegoat for other reasons. At any rate, he and Tung Ngoc Chiao were longtime friends, and Vann was not going to see this happen, and so Vann hid Tung Ngoc Chiao from the authorities. And it was this that Ambassador Bunker found intolerable, and told him the next time he pulled a stunt like this he was going to throw him out of the country.

I can remember another incident involving Ambassador Bunker, in which Vann, either in writing or orally, made the allegation that X per cent of all of the Vietnamese soldiers in the Delta were "ghost" soldiers-that is, didn't really exist, were names on a list.

Q: So you'd be drawing rations which would go to the commander.

WRIGHT: To the commander, exactly. And this was challenged by Ambassador Bunker, who said, "This doesn't sound right to me, and by the way, how do you know?" And so Vann wrote a paper on this subject, which I saw-I don't know what has ever happened to it. Vann, by the way, kept huge meticulous files. But Vann wrote a paper on this, which I can remember reading, in which he went, in a very detailed way, with dates, places, names, down a long list of places which he himself had verified, where he himself had spent the night, and where he said, "Okay, you say you've got a hundred soldiers here. Could you please call them all together so we can see them?" And maybe 50 would show up, and he'd say, "On the night of December 12, 1969, I was in X village, and these were the results." And he had, I don't know, 10 or 15 or 20 of these, and he said, "This is why I made the statement that I did."

So Vann was able, in a tremendously detailed way, to back up the kinds of things that he said. And he told me that often, instead of saying something which appeared extreme, he would, for dramatic effect and to make his point even more strongly, he would top somebody. Somebody, a congressman, would come out there and say, "This is really terrible. I understand that 12 per cent of these soldiers aren't even here." Now you can imagine what a normal Foreign Service officer's reaction to that would be: "Hmph, well..." Vann's reaction would always be, "Well, you don't know the half of it. It's much worse than that."

Q: Well, as a political advisor, it sounds like you didn't have much of a chance to do any political advising.

WRIGHT: Vann didn't need much political advice, but at the same time, Vann was willing to listen to people, by the way. And I think that that's not an aspect that I've brought up yet or maybe that you associate with Vann. I remember there was a fellow who was, I guess, with IVS, International Volunteer Services, and these tended to be, sometimes, kind of hippie types, free spirits who were in Vietnam and often doing good things, teaching English or other kinds of work like that, but they tended to be free spirits. Sometimes they were on marijuana; sometimes they were doing other things. And word reached me of such a fellow who was, I believe, in Chao Duc province, and our military were really down on this guy. They wanted Vann to throw him out. They thought he was a bad influence. Maybe they suspected he was in touch with the Viet Cong. I don't know. But anyway, they didn't like him, and they wanted him out, and they wanted Vann to throw him out. And he was the kind of guy you might think Vann would throw out. But Vann went and talked to this guy, and he came back, and he said, "Well, he's not such a bad guy. He's a little odd. He does this; he does that, but he knows a lot of things. He knows a lot about the local situation." So that's an example. Vann was not a knee-jerk kind of guy, who did things just because he had a guiding principle which says, "In this situation you do that." Vann went and saw for himself.

Q: Well, how did he get along with the military. He had been a military officer and left, but sort of doing things on his own, I would have thought that this would have not worked to well.

WRIGHT: I think they were divided about Vann. I think, on the one hand, they admired Vann for his military skills. Vann used to say, by the way, at that time, when he was about 46, that he had more combat experience than anybody in the US Army. And that, his bravery, his willingness to take risks—all of these were attractive qualities to military people. On the other hand, of course, they were a little nervous around him because they didn't know what he might do next. So there was some of that nervousness. But Vann also went out of his way to stay in touch with some of the higher-ups in the army, and so he had friends in high places in the military who appreciated him and who knew how good he was.

Q: Well, from your experience, did his alleged womanizing get in the way of anything or was that a problem?

WRIGHT: Well, he only slept four hours a night, don't forget, and he needed all that time. No, Vann was a womanizer, no doubt about it, and I presume that the effect on his family was probably very bad, probably severe, and I wouldn't seek to try to defend that.

Q: You say you left there in 1970 for the first time. I thought this might be a good place to stop for today.

WRIGHT: Okay.Q: In September 1970 you'd left Vietnam, and we'll pick it up next time where you go after that.

WRIGHT: Okay. Thank you.

[Pause]

WRIGHT: Again on John Paul Vann. Vann had a big effect on the way that the war was fought, and that does not, I believe, come through in any of the things that I've said up until now. Vann was the origin or one of the origins of the whole concept of Vietnamization, that is, the view that we should not be fighting the war for the Vietnamese, the Vietnamese should be fighting the war for themselves. I can remember, a number of times when visitors would come to Can Tho, Vann would inform them that up until 1968, even though we were drafting our young men into the military, South Vietnam, he said, was not drafting its young men into the military. That changed at Tet '68. But Vann pushed this idea until eventually it became US policy and we did engage in a whole process of Vietnamization. Another thing that Vann did, on a smaller but very significant scale, was to have gotten the rules of engagement for helicopter gunships and bombings changed in the Mekong Delta and elsewhere so that the lives of innocent people were better protected. This is one of the sadder parts of our involvement in Vietnam, that so many innocent people were killed. Vann saw this as a terrible problem, one that was inhumane in itself and one that was also preventing our side from winning the war by alienating so many of Vietnam's civilians. And he went through a lot of trouble to try to get the rules of engagement changed so that this happened less often. And he was successful in doing some of that.

So Vann had a big effect on the war and how it was fought. And by the way, we haven't even mentioned the fact that in the 1972 Easter Offensive people like Robert Thompson, the famous British guerilla war expert, credit Vann personally with having saved Vietnam from the Communists in that offensive. He believed, and many others do, too, that had Vann not taken over the military activities in Two Corps during that period, Vietnam would have fallen then.

Q: Okay. Shall we put this up again next time? In September 1970, when you've left Vietnam.

[pause]

Q: Today is the 26th of February, 1998. Lacy, in 1970 you leave Vietnam in September. Where did you go?

WRIGHT: I went to London.

Q: Aha. You were in London from when to when?

WRIGHT: For two years, from September of 1970 until June or so of 1972.

Q: Well, London and Saigon-there's a certain difference between the two places.

WRIGHT: Yes, quite a bit. In fact, I think I made a mistake by going to London. I wish now that I had stayed in Vietnam, which John Vann asked me to do. But I didn't. I went to London, and I was first aide to the Ambassador, and then I was in the commercial section, and then I went back to the United States, was in the economics course-

Q: This was in '72.

WRIGHT: '72.

Q: Well, why don't we stick to London first? Who was the Ambassador when you got there?

WRIGHT: Walter Annenberg.

Q: Could you talk about Ambassador Annenberg a bit. When he first arrived he was rather controversial, but by the time you got there I guess he was-

WRIGHT: Well, by the time I got there he was still controversial. I would say by the time he left, which must have been in '73 or '74, he was much less so and, I believe, fairly well liked. But from the time that he arrived, for two or three years, he was badly criticized by the British press, often unfairly, I think. It seemed he could do nothing right. But he got off to a bad start in London by chance, having appeared on a television show with the Queen, which had nothing to do with him but which had to do with the Queen receiving the credentials of an ambassador, and he happened to be up next. And so his presentation of his credentials to the Queen was filmed, and in it he made some remarks which, when they appeared on television, appeared stilted and, indeed, strange to the British public, and he was criticized for it.

Annenberg had some challenges to overcome when he went to London. First, he was, of course, the appointee of President Nixon, who was not very popular there, partially because we were in the middle of the Vietnam War. Secondly, his own past lent itself to a certain amount of criticism, his father having been sometimes on the other side of the law, and the British popular press didn't hesitate to remind readers of this from time to time. It was embarrassing. Third, a very critical book had come out about Annenberg about this time, which was widely disseminated and read. Fourth, Annenberg had a physical defect, in the sense that he stuttered. And this apparently was a lifelong affliction, and he had to go to certain lengths to try to overcome it. And one of the things that he did was to speak in very clipped and precise tones, syllable by syllable, which appeared stilted and strange when it was heard. And this was one of the things that was taken as an object of ridicule in the television piece that I referred to before.

Within the embassy? Annenberg was, of course a very wealthy man, in the tradition of people that go to places like London and Paris and Rome, and this in itself set him apart from everybody else there. But he was not a nasty man, by any means, and I think that he tried hard in the situation there to be liked in the embassy and, of course, do a good job. His style of management was-let me see how to put this... Let me not talk about his style, but let me talk about the situation that he found there. When he first arrived, he had a DCM in the person of Philip Kaiser, who was a political appointee DCM, the only one that I have ever known in my entire career in the Foreign Service, a Democrat, of course, from the previous administration. And naturally, the first thing that Annenberg did when he arrived was to fire Phil Kaiser, which seems to me the most normal thing in the world. Phil Kaiser apparently took umbrage at this, and one of the things that he did was not to leave London. He stayed there and got a job, and this was a source of a certain amount-at least from my bird's-eye view-of tension between Annenberg and him, which continued. I don't think he played a big role; I think it was a bit of an irritant, though, to have a situation that went on like that.

He was replaced by a man named Tom Hughes, who, I believe, left for personal reasons not very long after, a fairly short tenure. When I arrived, the DCM was a man named Jerry Green, a very fine career Foreign Service officer, an all-star-that's why he was in London-very nice man, as well. And I was his aide as well as aide to the Ambassador for a certain time. Jerry Green and the Ambassador eventually fell out, which was very unfortunate, I think. It was unfortunate for the career of Jerry Green, who only had one or two more assignments and then left the Service and did not become an ambassador, although he was certainly very much headed in that direction. But Jerry Green was caught in a strange situation. He was the DCM, and a strong one, but he found himself between a political ambassador, who was uncertain of his own role, I believe, and did not know how the Foreign Service worked (no reason why he should), on the one hand, and on the other hand, a group of heads of section, counselors, most of whom were prima donnas and all of whom wanted direct access to the Ambassador. In the middle of this sandwich was Jerry Green. And eventually, I guess after several situations which were not totally pleasing to the Ambassador, one arose in which Jerry Green made a decision, because he thought he needed to. It was something that must have been time-sensitive; I don't remember what it was. But he made the decision, as I remember it, and then told the Ambassador later, and the Ambassador felt this was something that he should have been in on from the beginning-a common kind of contretemps in the Foreign Service, but this one coming on top of other things probably assumed bigger proportions than it might have otherwise. And Jerry Green, knowing that he had displeased the Ambassador, took the initiative and asked to be reassigned and was. So I haven't explained much yet, I think, about Annenberg's management style, but I believe it's more correct to put it in terms of a situation which developed there and which was not entirely felicitous.

After I left, I understand, things settled down there, and Annenberg, in fact, became fairly well liked by the British. And that was, I think, an achievement on his part, since before that, as I said, almost every thing he did was criticized. He gave, I remember, a painting to Chequers, you know, one of the residences of the prime minister, and he was criticized for that in an editorial in the Times, with words to the effect of "Who does this guy think he is, giving us a painting?" So almost nothing he did seemed to turn out right. But as I say, in the end, I think when he left much of that situation had been redressed.

Q: During the '70-'72 period, Vietnam was still very much in everybody's mind. Did you find yourself being sort of the resident advisor on what's happening in Vietnam and all, I mean, people coming to you, including the Ambassador, and saying, "Tell me about Vietnam"?

WRIGHT: There was some of that, although one of the things that happened when I was there was that John Vann came and visited. Before I had left Vietnam, Vann and I talked, and he knew I was coming to London, so taking the initiative as usual, said, "Look, when you get there, why don't you have the embassy ask that I come there and brief them about Vietnam, because I'm going to be in the US and I could come back through there and I could brief the embassy?" So that, in fact, is what I did. I made this suggestion. Vann was-I wouldn't say he was a household word by any means-but he was known among people in our service who followed this, so I was able to persuade the Ambassador and one of his political-appointee aides that this would be a good idea, and so it was done. And Vann came to London. He had gone back to the United States and gotten sick, and I don't know what it was, whether it was hepatitis or what, but it laid him low for several weeks, so he was some weeks late in getting back to Vietnam. But he did come through London. He stayed with me in my apartment, and he spoke to the country team, including the Ambassador, as I remember, and he was received with a lot of interest because we were at the height of the war and at the height of the criticism of the war, and the British, particularly the press-not totally, but certainly the left side of the spectrum-was very critical of our involvement there. We also had a number of demonstrations in front of the embassy, which became a favorite haunt of people who were against the war.

Q: I'm sure this was the time a little earlier that the now President of the United States, William Clinton, demonstrated. Do you know which one he demonstrated in?

WRIGHT: I don't know. I can't quite place him, but I guess he might have been. Another one of the things that happened then was that even within our embassy, there were differences of view, of course, about Vietnam. And I remember that we had a USIS officer who had come into the Foreign Service with me who was stationed there, very much against the war, and one of his jobs was to explain our position on Vietnam to people who called or wrote in, and he found this so distasteful that he quit that service. And he was a person who was never able to, or maybe he didn't want to, make the distinction between what the US Government had as its position and what he himself thought personally. He didn't seem to realize that when people called in they didn't care what he thought, they cared what the US Government thought.

Q: Well, I think it's always these things. People say, "Aw, the poor bright guy shouldn't have been put in that position," but in a way it's a good weeding-out process, because there'll be other things, too. From the reflection of the Ambassador or the DCM and also in your other jobs, what was your feeling toward the Labor Party in that time?

WRIGHT: Well, Wilson was prime minister then. As I remember it, I think Wilson himself was well regarded. He was a very able politician, a very smart man. Our embassy, the political section, of course, had lots of links with both parties, and in fact, the political counselor scored a bit of a triumph by having become very close to a Conservative politician by the name of Ted Heath, who later, of course, became prime minister. But I don't know that I can shed much more light than that on your question.

Q: In your time as aide, what was your impression of the Ambassador's social life? Was it pretty much focused on the political establishment and the media, or did it get off into the higher reaches of the royals and all that?

WRIGHT: I don't think it got much into the reaches of the royals. First of all, let me say that I'm sure the Ambassador did lots of things that I was not aware of. I don't remember his being involved with the Royal Family. I do think that he was involved with a number of politicians, which he ought to have been. That was the right thing to have done. And I'm sure that he must have entertained lots of people from the United States, lots of Republicans and other people that he knew, but within British society-and I'm sure he knew lots of people one way or another in British society-what I do remember are various politicians, political figures, that he entertained, as he should have done as part of his job.

Q: The group of visitors from the United States, I would think that this would be almost a traffic control problem. So many visitors would come from so many levels of government and from outside and all that.

WRIGHT: Yes, there were lots and lots of them. And of course, the embassy itself was huge, so there were lots of people to take care of these visitors, but as you can imagine, there was a steady stream of State Department official, congressmen, and others who traipsed through our halls.

Q: When you went down to be in the commercial section, what was your work, mainly?

WRIGHT: The work was mainly to try to promote American exports. The section was divided among different kinds of products, so that one officer had high-technology products, for example. I had consumer products and other things. I also had a kind of sideline, which was the steel industry, with which we had a certain number of policy matters to take up, particularly involving the so-called "voluntary restraints" arrangement, which, as I'm sure you know, was a commercial policy of ours the effect of which was to limit exports of steel into the United States from various steel-producing countries and do it in a way that did not require legislation or the imposition of quotas or anything like that, but which was "voluntary." Of course, it wasn't really voluntary, but more voluntary than the alternatives. And since the UK was a big steel-producer, that was a big item on our agenda.

Q: Did you have problems with that, or was it just a matter of sort of monitoring?

WRIGHT: It was a matter of monitoring it, keeping up to speed on what was going on in the different parts of the steel industry. I'm sure at levels higher than mine there was some knocking of heads, but that did not impede my work.

Q: What about consumer products? Did you feel the British market was pretty open as far as, I assume, things like Post Toasties or sportswear or what have you?

WRIGHT: Yes, I think so. In fact, we had in the area of sportswear and men's wear and the entire textile area, we had large trade shows come from the United States. There was, as I think everywhere in the world in the fashion area, a broad acceptance of things made in the United States, and even at that time, even with a certain amount of anti-Americanism in the air, among the young, there was a certain fascination with American pop culture, and that all played to our benefit.

Q: Did you find, as you mixed in British society, that your time in Vietnam... How old were you then?

WRIGHT: In 1970, I was 30 years old.

Q: So you're still part of the youth generation, pretty young, and I would have thought that the people you were meeting, the British society, would give you a difficult time for your time in Vietnam.

WRIGHT: Oh, they did, yes, they did. That is correct. One of my friends even before I went there was a man named Malcolm Dean, a man who was and still is with the Guardian, which is a leftist newspaper, and so many of the people that I met I met through him, and they all tended to think more or less alike, and the one thing that they knew for sure was that we were wrong in Vietnam. And so yes, this was a kind of constant feature of life.

On the other hand, I also met young Conservatives, who held quite a different view. One of the people that I met then that I still have a little bit of contact with every now and then was a man named Ian Sproat, who was at one time during those years the youngest M.P. in the British Parliament-he is still around, although he might have lost out this last time-and became a junior minister later on. But he, in fact, took a big interest in Vietnam and visited Vietnam and met John Vann in Vietnam as well as when Vann came to London, if I'm not mistaken. So he and other Conservatives that I met took quite a different view. But I would say that most of the people that I knew were on the left.

Q: What about the Guardian crowd that you knew? How did they view the Soviet Union at that time, '70-'72?

WRIGHT: Oh, I'm not sure I remember any conversations about the Soviet Union. I could make some guesses. I suppose that, if pressed, they would acknowledge that the Soviet Union had done a number of bad things, but probably they would have added that our approach to the Soviet Union was often unnecessarily harsh and we should be nurturing the people in the USSR who were more moderate. I imagine that's the kind of line they would have taken.

Q: You left London in '72, and where to?

WRIGHT: I came back to Washington, and I was in the economics course. That was a three-or four-month course at that time. It began in the beginning of the summer, the one that I took, and I did not finish it quite because I was called back to Vietnam. And that, I think, was a very interesting phenomenon. You know, I would say that almost all of us who went to Vietnam initially went there kicking and screaming. That's the last place most of us wanted to go. In fact, a number of people, until they had gotten in the Foreign Service, I'm sure, had taken every measure they could to keep themselves from being sent to Vietnam. So there we all were, and most of us were sent there, and most of us didn't want to be sent there. However, in 1972, many of us were going to be asked to go back a second time, and I remember that we were called, those of us who were supposed to go, to the State Department Operations Center by U. Alexis Johnson, and he was the one who gave us our initial talk, briefing, about what we were to do and how this came about. I always have imagined that this presented the powers that were in the State Department with a bit of a problem. The whole idea was to send people to monitor the observance of the peace agreement, which was coming up and which, indeed, was signed in the beginning of 1973.

So as the signing drew closer and as the Department was preparing for it, it decided that it would send people out to do this monitoring. Well, it didn't make much sense to send brand new people to Vietnam to do this, they must have figured; they had to send people who had already been there. But how were they going to do this? They'd already asked people to go to Vietnam once; how were they going to ask them to go to Vietnam again? Well, I guess they must have thought, We will design a program that will be as attractive as possible. We'll only tell them they have to go for six months. They can have an R & R in the middle of that and either go back to their post or go to Washington, which meant in practice that you could go anywhere in the world that you wanted. And we'll give them the normal hardship pay of 24 per cent more than their salary. And then at the other end, we'll seal it off, however, by saying that if you're called, you have to go; this is not a volunteer situation. So having done that, they drew up a list of people, and they notified all of us, and do you know what happened? Something that I'm sure surprised everybody. Instead of having a hard time getting to go, people were coming out of the woodwork anxious to go back to Vietnam. In fact, the personnel bureau was getting phone calls saying "Hey, how come my name's not on the list to go back to Vietnam?" So the way it turned out, they had no trouble getting people to go back to Vietnam, so much so that those who really didn't want to go, as I remember it, were excused because so many people did want to go. And that is very revealing, I think, of the way that service in Vietnam grabbed on to people and turned people who were initially very reluctant to go into people who found the whole experience really fascinating.

Q: Also, I think, this is also at a certain point, having been through it once, and this is a new thing, and wanting to be-this is where the action was.

WRIGHT: That's true.

Q: But there is this attraction to that. You were there from really about '73, was it?

WRIGHT: Yes, the beginning of '73, January of '73, I believe, until the end, which was, of course, April 30, 1975.

Q: So this was not a six-month tour.

WRIGHT: Not for me, because I extended.

Q: What about family?

WRIGHT: I was not married then. I didn't get married until 1976, so that was not a consideration at the time. It was, of course, a consideration for a lot of other people.

Q: Well, when you went out there in '73, what was the word of wisdom within the State Department of the Vietnam hands about these peace accords that were coming up and all. What was the mood before you got out there?

WRIGHT: I think everybody was delighted that the war seemed to be coming to an end, did come to an end, at least temporarily. I think there was a lot of skepticism about how effective the peace accords would turn out to be, skepticism which proved very well founded. But I guess if you had taken a poll of the people who went out there, I'm sure you would have found a whole spectrum of views about what was going to happen, probably weighted on the skeptical side.

Q: So you got out there in '73, and you were doing what? Did you have several jobs, or-

WRIGHT: Yes, I had a whole series of jobs. I went back to Can Tho in the Delta, and we formed a new structure. At that point, with the signing of the peace accords, we founded consulates general in each of the four military corps, which became the focal point of our activities and replaced the CORDs structure which was there before.

So I went down to IV Corps. The man who was named to be the consul general was Tom Barnes. Tom Barnes was an extremely bright, very dynamic and idiosyncratic guy, who was, by the way, a close associate and admirer of John Vann. In fact he had been John Vann's deputy when Vann was killed up in II Corps. He was a terrific language speaker. He spoke Vietnamese and learned many other languages and was tough as nails and was probably an admirable choice for the job that he was assigned to. And I think that despite his having been a man who was really tough in his evaluations of people and in the way he did business-cold-blooded, I think, is the word comes to mind-he left that six-month stint held in very high esteem by those of us who worked for him.

I might tell you that one of the things that Tom Barnes did which I've never seen anyone else do in the Foreign Service-Barnes was, of course, a career Foreign Service officer-he had about 16 of us working for him, that is, 16 young officers who were his staff, as well as a deputy, who was Frank Wisner. And he first of all said that all of us were to be called vice-consuls. Well, this rankled some people who felt that that title was too low for them. Maybe they had had a higher one somewhere else. At any rate, some people didn't like it. He wanted everybody to be, first of all, on an equal footing and, secondly, easily distinguishable from himself, who was the consul general. But the thing that he did that really raised some eyebrows was in the way he evaluated people. He evaluated us against one another. That is, he would say, "I'm going to rank all of you. One of you is going to be first, one of you is going to second, and one of you is going to be 16th," or words to that effect. And he carried that over, not totally but to some degree, to our written evaluations. He would say something like, "Mr. Jones did a fine job here. Among 16 officers, he was in the top half," or the top third, or maybe even better. I don't remember how he phrased things for people who were in the bottom half or the bottom third. He may have been silent on that, but I don't know. But anyway, he'd let all of us know where he thought we ranked among our peers. As I say, he carried it over into our evaluations to some degree, which I've never seen done anywhere else in the Foreign Service. And of course, you had to be an awfully strong character to have even thought of such a thing, let alone done it.

Q: Let's talk about Can Tho. What were you doing?

WRIGHT: Several things. At first, I was down in Chung Tien Province, which was in the middle of the Delta. I don't think I stayed down there for very long, several weeks probably, and I reported back what was going on on the ground down there. Then I went up to Can Tho, to the headquarters, and I was one of the officers assigned to headquarters. And I guess I must have traveled around some. I had already been in the Delta, unlike a lot of other people there, and so I knew the lay of the land better than most people, although some of the other people had also been there in different provinces. Desaix Anderson, for example, was one of the young officers. He had been in My Tho, and he came back. Then I became a kind of reports officer, I guess, for a while, working with Frank Wisner, and then, as the six months drew to an end, I decided to extend, and I became, at some point, the person who was going to stay and be the number two at the consulate general. I'm not quite sure when Tom Barnes left, probably June or July. I believe then that Frank Wisner was acting consul general for a while. In fact, he was until the arrival of the new consul general, who was Wolf Lehmann. And then I think Frank left soon after Lehmann arrived, and I became Lehmann's deputy.

Q: What were we doing there, I mean, all over? What was the idea of this group down in the Delta and, by inference, what the other ones were doing?

WRIGHT: Well, we were doing a certain amount of the same things that we were doing before in a diminished way, but first of all, we were doing a lot of reporting. We were trying to report on the observance of the peace agreement. We were reporting, for example, any outbreaks of fighting that occurred. We were reporting the movements of the South Vietnamese forces and, to the extent that we could, of the enemy's forces. We were reporting the activities and watching the activities of the ICCS, the International Control Commission, which was composed of the Canadians, the Polish, the Hungarians-it seems to me there were four of them, had to be-I'm forgetting somebody-Indonesia. And for them, the Can Tho area was Region VII. And so we got to know a number of them, and we were very interested in what they were doing. At the same time, a lot of the world development effort that we had been doing in the Delta for some years we continued to do with, however, very much diminished personnel. We still had a kind of "rump" CORDs structure out there. We had AID people in the different provinces. But as time went on, that became smaller and smaller, so that by the time that Wolf Lehmann, after he had been there a year or so, went up to Saigon to become DCM, which was in about April of 1974, I had become acting consul general, and there were about 100 Americans working in the Delta.

Q: Well, what was happening in the Delta? The peace accords had been signed. Immediately prior to the peace accords, had there been much enemy North Vietnamese-Viet Cong activity there, and during the time you were part of this team, what was happening? What were the South Vietnamese doing?

WRIGHT: It started off quite well. The South Vietnamese were going around trying to clean things up, which they should not have been doing if they had been observing the peace accords strictly. But both sides were violating it to some degree. The Communists, too, were jockeying for position, trying to stash people here and there. The main thing that happened, however, I would say, over that year and a half period, was the progressive disarming of our side, so that I can remember, when I became acting consul general, in April or so of 1974, we did a long cable from the Delta, which I wish I still had. I remember it was 16 pages, and it was an analysis of the situation, and it was a very pessimistic cable because by that time the arms and munitions available to the South Vietnamese army had really gone down to a worrying degree. There were starting to be a lot more desertions. Whereas before a platoon, say, in an outpost which had been used to expending a huge amount of mortars and rockets as a matter of course, in fact, wastefully so, they were now down to maybe a quota of one or two mortars per day. And all this was starting to tell on the morale of the South Vietnamese.

Q: Was this a deliberate policy on our part, or what was causing this?

WRIGHT: I guess overall, the US Congress was causing it because they were reluctant to commit more funds to the Vietnam War. And I guess in the winter of that year, 1974, November, December, a Congressional delegation came out to Vietnam to take a hard look at what our situation was, and a huge amount of effort was expended by Ambassador Martin and the whole embassy to try to convince them that this was doable and winnable and that we had to stick it out, and that was largely a failure. They went back, and they greatly cut down the amount of aid to Vietnam.

Q: What were you getting from these congressmen? Were they essentially saying, "They're not going to win, and so we might as well just not put money down a rat hole"?

WRIGHT: Well, you had a certain number of them, like Bella Abzug, I think was here, who were against the war all along anyway. I'm not sure I can answer your question with precision. I don't remember conversations of that kind with members, and so I don't want to mischaracterize them, but I think the overall feeling was that this was enough. If they can't do it now, with all of the huge amount of help that we've given them, then giving them more is not going to do the trick. Now, one of the things, also, that I'm sure some of them thought, because it was an idea that was floating around at the time and afterwards, was that the South Vietnamese were just playing possum; that is, that they really had a huge cache of arms of various kinds but they were doling them out in a stingy way in order to give us an impression that they were on their last legs. This idea gained a certain amount of currency, and it has been addressed, very forcefully, by General John Murray. John Murray was the second to the last American commander in Vietnam, a logistics officer who was sent there, frankly, to bring about our disengagement from Vietnam. And John Murray is still very much alive, lives not far from here, and has written a number of magazine articles and other things addressing this question of whether the South Vietnamese army was in fact fat with munitions but choosing to behave otherwise. And he says absolutely not. In fact, he believes that our failure to stay with them was totally shameful.

Q: What were your relations and your impressions with the Vietnamese commanders, civil and military, in the Delta, and their impressions of us?

WRIGHT: We had different relations with different ones. I think that overall there was a good deal of mistrust of us. On the other hand, they had nowhere else to go, so most of them could hardly say, "Well, we're going to stop seeing you." But there was a lot of mistrust, a feeling that we were, from the beginning, bending over backwards to play fair, to the benefit of the other side. And then, as things went on, that became more and more acute, so much so that when the final evacuation occurred, there was a great deal of fear that we would be shot at by our own allies as we departed the country. That did not happen, but the fact that the fear, the concern, was there shows you that there was a good deal of resentment on the part of many South Vietnamese at our policies and our behavior.

Q: Did the situation, while you were in the Delta, change?

WRIGHT: Oh, yes. It deteriorated greatly. You know, at the beginning of 1973, don't forget that we had come through a period of a lot of success for the South Vietnamese Government. I would say that from the time that I arrived there in 1969-don't forget that the last American ground troops left the Delta in 1969, that is, six years before the end of the war-and so all of the ground activity conducted in the Delta for the last six years of the war was done by Vietnamese troops. And there was a tremendous amount of progress made. There were big areas that were opened up to normal activity which had been under the control of the Communists. In 1974, when Terry McNamara, who has just written a book on this subject, came back to the Delta-

Q: It's called Retreat with Honor.

WRIGHT: That's right, and it's a very good book, I think. I've read about half of it, and it's excellent. But he describes his surprise when he came back in late 1974 at the degree to which areas that had previously been under Communist control were no longer so. So even that late, after all this deterioration near the end, McNamara could come back and see that things were still a lot better than they had been three years before. So what happened during that last year and a half was a very sad and rapid deterioration of conditions in the Delta, which of course, culminated in the takeover by the Communists in 1975.

Q: What was your and your colleagues' impression of the Control Commission during the time when you first started off there.

WRIGHT: Well, they were split along political lines, and that was very evident. The Communist members of the Control Commission were continually trying to see things in a way favorable to the Communist side, and the Canadians-who, by the way, dropped out after a certain point-and the Indonesians were on the other side.

Q: I know when we both were there in 1969-70, the feeling was the Canadians were pretty sound, I mean quite sound, and the Indians were wishy-washy and the Poles were agents of the other side, so-

WRIGHT: Yes, exactly right.

Q: -so that as a group this was really not an effective one at all.

WRIGHT: I guess that's right, and in fact, that's what impelled the Canadians to leave. They had been threatening to leave for some time, and I didn't think they would, but indeed they did.

Q: Were there any reflections of what was happening in Cambodia. I'm talking about the time you were in the Delta.

WRIGHT: Yes, there were. In fact, I would say in the second half of 1973, maybe early 1974-no let's say the first half of 1974 particularly-we were getting reports of killings-I 'm not sure massacres is the right word, but killings-and people fleeing from Cambodia into Vietnam in northern Chao Duc Province. So much so that one of the people that was working in our consulate general, Ken Quinn, who is now ambassador to Cambodia, did a series of superb reports, which I think were the first intimation of what the Khmer Rouge were doing and would later do to a horrifying degree in Cambodia.

Q: Did you have American military observers around who were able to feed in information about the effectiveness of the ARVN, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam?

WRIGHT: Yes, I'm trying to remember whether we had military people attached to the consulate general. I know that we had people who came from Saigon, and I know, for example, that retired General Charlie Timmes used to come down from the embassy and talk with the commanders. His special job was to interface with the generals, the people that he had known before in Vietnam, and try to get their candid views of what was going on. So he would come down and make the rounds and talk to people and go back and write reports. So that's one way in which the embassy attempted to keep track of what was going on militarily.

Q: As you were seeing what you felt was a situation beginning to deteriorate, were you, or at least your group there, sort of making mental plans about what to do if the thing fell apart? I mean, were you feeling that that could come about?

WRIGHT: No, not at that point. We were worried about the situation, and in fact, in the cable that I told you about before, which gave a very pessimistic assessment... That cable went to Saigon but was never passed on to Washington. And Ambassador Martin, who ran things with an iron hand-that's the way he had the embassy structured. The consulates reported only to Saigon, and Saigon looked at it and decided what to pass on to Washington, and it did not pass that on to Washington. Once later, when I went up to Saigon to work, I was in a conversation with Martin in his office, I think I brought up why my cable had not been sent, and he was very much aware of it, and he said that he was reporting other things and he feared that that would have created-I forgot how he put it-a misimpression in Washington. Of course, that was very consistent with Martin's management of the news, which in the end did not serve him very well, because he became distrusted by the press and others for his consistently over-optimistic depictions of what was happening

Q: You're talking about this cable, and just to get a feel for this, often when you have something of this nature that somebody sits on, it gets back anyway. A friend comes along or somebody comes along and you say, "Well, I did this cable; it never went out." Did you have the feeling that what you were reporting, was this getting back to Washington?

WRIGHT: Well, I think it was. I remember, for example, that we were visited at a certain point by the famous Moose and Lowenstein team-I think it was Moose and Lowenstein at the point.

Q: Yes, it was.

WRIGHT: Well, you know later it became Moose and Meissner, but I think it was Lowenstein. They came down, and I talked to them, and in fact, they mentioned my cable in one of their reports. They didn't have the cable, but they mentioned it. So I think that, as a constant during the Vietnam War, Washington had a good idea of what was going on. You know, Daniel Ellsberg has written an essay on that subject, wrote it a long time ago, in which he contended that although many mistakes were made in decisions on the Vietnam War through the years by the various presidents involved, none of them emanated from bad information.

Q: Well, did the media come down to you? Did you see a difference in who the people were, superstars gone, and that sort of thing? What did you feel about it?

WRIGHT: They did come down. That's a good question. I did see various media people in Saigon. I'm trying to remember. Yes, Peter Kann was still there, and I can remember once that Peter Kann came to the Delta, Wall Street Journal. I knew very well Gavin Scott of Time Magazine, who came down there once, although it was after I'd left. But yes, people did come down, and because there was still a large press corps in Saigon. I'd have to think some more about your question to compare it to what had been going on, say, two or three years before, but I think the general answer is yes, there was still a fair amount of interest in what was going on in the Delta.

Q: You came up to Saigon when?

WRIGHT: In I believe it was probably early September of 1974.

Q: And you were there until, what, April 30th?

WRIGHT: April 30th, 9 p.m.

Q: What job did you come up to?

WRIGHT: I came up to the job of deputy director of the internal unit of the political section.

Q: How big was our embassy at that point. Let's look at the political section.

WRIGHT: The political section must have had 20 people or so, and it was divided into the internal unit, the external unit-or was it? I guess the external unit was small and had with our relations with different embassies. And then there was the Pol-Mil unit, which was probably three or four officers.

Q: Well, you think of this huge section with an ambassador on top who's trying to keep the news from going out, essentially, from accounts anyway, that he's essentially trying to create or control what news goes out, it's sort of an unworldly situation.

WRIGHT: Yes. Now don't forget that first of all, some of the people who were in the political section, at least-I don't want to overstate myself-were people whom Martin brought with him. In fact, a number of the people in the embassy were people whom Martin had brought with him and who were-I don't want to use the word loyal because that's probably over-dramatizing it and creating something that I don't necessarily think was true-but people that he had known for some time and who probably to some degree thought as he did. At the same time, the history of that last year or so has in it several instances of people who had a falling-out with Martin and left because of it. I can think of three or so right off the bat.

Q: Who were they?

WRIGHT: Well, one would have been the guy who was the head of the Pol-Mil unit after Danang fell and he came back from Danang: Al Francis, who was a long associate of Martin and had been brought to the country by Martin. He was a very strong personality. He became convinced, near the end, that there was no chance that the South Vietnamese could win. And I don't know any more what the specifics of his views were, but I think generally they were that we had to start to base our tactics on something other than the hope that the South Vietnamese could hold out. And he left some weeks before the end. Ken Moorefield, who had been aide to the ambassador and had very much distinguished himself in the final evacuation-again I don't remember the specifics, but I believe his transfer out of his job was accompanied by a bit of a falling-out with Martin. Another one, probably more dramatic, had to do with Lannon Walker, whom Martin had brought to Vietnam to be the administrative counselor. Lannon did have a falling out with Martin and left. Then there's the case of the Air Force general, whose name I don't remember, who jumped the gun on spiriting Vietnamese out of Vietnam who worked for him, who found himself on the next plane out, who was fired and attacked by Martin for having done that. I can probably think of a few others.

Q: When you got there in September of '74, did you find a different atmosphere in the internal political section than you'd felt out in the field?

WRIGHT: I suppose so, and particularly as the time approached for the evacuation. There was increasing tension and increasing worry, by myself too and others, that we were not starting preparations for the evacuation fast enough. Shep Lowman, head of the internal unit, was my boss. Shep felt the same way. Ken Quinn, by that time, was back in the NSC. He had been out, I believe, on a Congressional delegation. He too was worried. Some of these people were worried because they actually had families back in Vietnam, Ken Quinn being one of them, married to a Vietnamese so worried on that account and for broader reasons. But at any rate, Martin was very reluctant to begin overt preparations for an evacuation, and I think that, even though he's been greatly criticized for that, there were very good reasons why he should have been worried about that. We had just seen Danang fall apart in a horrible chaos. We had just seen more recently Nha Trang fall apart and its people having to flee at short notice. And I'm sure that Martin had to be greatly worried at the prospect that there could be that kind of chaos in Saigon, which would have endangered the lives of all of us, as well as lives of the Vietnamese. So I don't fault Martin for being very, very careful here, even though I was worried that he was leaving things until too late.

Martin did do another thing, though, that I think was ill-advised. Martin had a kind of divide-and-rule approach to management, and he would have two different people working on the same thing, or he would have people working on things whose lines of authority were not very clear, and I believe that he did that very much on purpose. And one of the results of this was that the evacuation itself suffered from this kind of thing. I can remember that on the night before the final evacuation, we were all called into the embassy very late at night, those of us who were involved in the evacuation-that was 15 or 20 people-and at that late date it was not clear who was in charge of the meeting, who was in charge of the evacuation. And I believe that the two people who were contenders were Jim Devine, who was at that point, I believe, the head of the political-military unit, and-I'm trying to think of who else. Maybe it was the former colonel...

Q: Oh, yes. I know who you mean. We can fill that in later. He was the colonel who was in-

WRIGHT: Jake Jacobson. It was those two, and it was not clear which one of them was in charge; at least it was not clear to me. So that's an example of what happened.

A much more serious example of this lack of coordination was what happened on the day itself. I think particularly of what happened with Ken Moorefield, who, like me, was out riding buses around trying to take people to the airport. Some time before, a couple of the AID people, Mel Chaplin being one-I forget the other one-had what seemed at first like a crazy idea but was not, and that is that, added to airlift capability, we should have some barges down on the river to take people out. And these two guys helped set that up. It was their idea, as I remember it, and they helped set this up. And by the way, thousands and thousands of Vietnamese got out this way, in the end. But not everybody knew about the barges, so Ken Moorefield was unable for some reason to get the people on his bus, at least at one point, to the airport, and he had to abandon them. Had he known about the barges, he could have taken these people there and they would have gotten out. So that's an example of a very poor coordination that had a very bad effect.

Q: Could you talk about how this developed, the collapse, and how you were seen and what were getting?

WRIGHT: The collapse occurred because President Thieu implemented a policy, or strategy, which had been talked about for some time, but he did it in an extremely poor way. The strategy was, as things became more and more dire, and as South Vietnamese capabilities diminished, to cede the northern part of the country to the other side and pull back and defend the rest. I heard that this idea originated with General John Murray. In the event-and by the way, nothing more dramatically shows the distrust between the South Vietnamese Government and us than this-what happened was that Thieu decided on his own to implement this strategy. Our chargé d'affaires (Martin was in the United States), Wolf Lehmann, was over at the Presidential Palace, if I remember correctly, on the very day that Thieu issued this order, and Thieu neglected to mention it to him. And Thieu, I believe, called his commanders down to Saigon and ordered them, within a day or two or three, to implement this pullback. And it turned out to be a horrible disaster, and as soon as it occurred, that is within several days, it was clear that everything was over, that it would only be a matter of a few weeks before the end would be definitive.

Q: Say, in the political section you had people out in the field all over the place. Were you making an effort without over-consultation with the Ambassador to get your people in and all?

WRIGHT: Well, I think events were taking care of that. I'm not quite sure of the time frames now, but I guess very early on must have occurred the fall of Danang, probably within a week or a shorter time of the decision to pull back. That occurred, I guess, as soon as General Ngo Quang Truong was drawn into this, and he had to reverse course on an instant's notice and lost his entire army. And I guess that must have involved the fall of Danang, so that it was events that were forcing all this. Now in the Delta, this was not occurring. There was no pullback there, for example, although I'm sure that as soon as this occurred this greatly heightened the need to prepare for their own evacuation. But I don't believe it involved the pullback of any personnel. But anyway, it was clear to everybody, I think, as soon as events occurred, what the dangers were. I guess one question is whether people started to be pulled back from Nha Trang at this time. I think that Nha Trang, if I remember correctly, was not overrun. I'm not sure about this; I don't quite remember that Nha Trang was overrun. I don't think so. I think that as the situation became very dangerous very fast, our people evacuated, if I'm not mistaken, but had to do so very, very quickly, not in much of an orderly way.

Q: Well, what was the atmosphere when all this was happening in the political section, and maybe from your CIA colleagues and others?

WRIGHT: Well, we were getting a lot of our information from our CIA colleagues. They're the people that at that point were getting reports from the field, mostly, so a lot of our information was coming through them. I was in a fair amount of contact with Frank Snepp at that point, and he was the source of a certain amount of our information.

By the way, one of the things that was occurring was that the South Vietnamese were, in a sense, the last to know, because their information was what they could get either by word of mouth or over official channels. And even though there was a great deal of alarm, I think it's fair to say there was not very good information coming out about all of this. And I remember at one point Ambassador Martin badgered Alan Carter to go on television and say, in effect, that things are under control. And Carter, I think against his better judgment, did this.

Q: Who was he?

WRIGHT: I'm sorry. Alan Carter was the head of USIS. And gained the opprobrium of a great many Vietnamese who later saw that this was not the way things were at all, but who, at the time, had a certain amount of faith in it because they thought, well, this is the official word of the American Government. It must be right.

But back to the political section, I think that once the retreat had been botched up, it was pretty clear to almost everybody that the end was near, and now it was a matter of trying to accelerate preparations for an evacuation and to move ahead like that and try to not delay things until it was too late. One of the things that we were doing that really sounds almost comical from this vantage point was to make lists of people-Vietnamese-that we were going to try to evacuate with us. The intention was good but the task was monumental. We were trying to look first of all at categories of people that we would try to evacuate-the legislature, the judiciary, the high-ranking military people, and so on, others who had been close to us, generally people who we felt would be in danger if they did not leave. And we had long lists of these kinds of people. I suppose that it was of some help at the end, and in fact, there was some order to the way we did things. In the final ten days, Martin put me in charge of getting out the Vietnamese families of Americans, and I did that, I and others, by choosing safe houses. We would get word to people, let us say, a mother- and father-in-law of an American officer and their family and tell them to appear at a safe house the following morning, and we would take them in a bus to the airport and they would leave. And we did this for about the last ten days, and I would say that we got out about a thousand people in that way. But of course that was only one of the things that was going on.

Q: Were you driving buses now, or did that happen later on?

WRIGHT: That happened later on. I usually stayed back at the safe house. Other people drove the buses, Phil McBride, for example, Art Cobler and several others who kind of came and went during that period.

Q: Were you having any problems with people like Lionel Rosenblatt and all, or problems with Foreign Service officers who had friends, family and all and just sort of took leave and appeared there. Did they work with you, or how did that work?

WRIGHT: Yes, they were there. I wouldn't call it a problem, although it was a problem for the embassy. I can remember Wolf Lehmann looking at me sternly and saying, "If you see Lionel Rosenblatt, you be sure to get back to me and tell me." I did see Lionel Rosenblatt. I neglected to get back to the DCM about it. Lionel did show up at least once at one of our safe houses, so I did run into him during that period.

Q: But they were getting his friends and family out, weren't they.

WRIGHT: Yes, not family, but people who had worked with him. I might tell you that years later I spent a day with Henry Kissinger in the refugee camps in Thailand, probably about 1986, so I had a long time to talk to him about the Vietnam War. And Kissinger said at one point, "You know, with regard to Lionel Rosenblatt and Craig Johnstone, when they came back, I had to lecture them about what they had done, but I privately admired them a great deal for having done it." So, yes, Lionel came, and I guess he was there for three or four days and then left.

Q: So how did this whole thing culminate for you?

WRIGHT: Well, we carried out our evacuation effort until the last day. As I mentioned, the night before the last day we had a meeting, and by then I guess the intelligence was such that we knew there was only one more day. And so we were told to pull out all the stops the following day. And then, as if to confirm that, that night-in fact maybe we already knew this at the time, I don't know-the airport was shelled, rendering it unusable by big fixed-wing aircraft. The Ambassador drove out to the airport, against everyone's advice, that morning about 10, and came back and definitively ordered the final evacuation. So on that last day, there was still a 24-hour curfew in effect, so there was nobody on the streets, or practically nobody, at the beginning of the day. I was in the embassy early. I only lived about a block away, so I just walked over. In fact, I walked over very early because I could hear the airport being bombed, which is a disturbing sound. So I got in at six or seven o'clock, and there were a number of people there already, so we started gearing up to make our final rounds. I guess we must have already, the previous day, let certain people know to be at what was on that day our safe house, because there were people there. And starting, I guess, about noon or so, maybe earlier, Joe McBride and I started going to the safe house and driving people to the airport.

I can remember poignant scenes from that day. One occurred as Joe and I were there I think together at one point and taking people out from the safe house, and I guess we made about three or four rounds, and on the last one-I don't remember whether we knew it would be the last one, but it was-there were more people there than could fit on the bus, and so the bus quickly became full. Excuse me, it was probably not a bus-it was a van. The van became full. And I can remember one Vietnamese man who, I'm sure, knew it was the last one, but who stepped aside and gave his place to a lady and maybe some children and said, "Oh, don't worry, I'll take the next one," I'm sure knowing there would not be a next one.

I also remember that at one of the houses there were some people there who were left. I can't quite remember who they were, but I made one last-ditch effort to go around and see if anyone was there. And at that point I was driving the van, and it was so crowded that I actually had one of the children sitting in my lap as I was driving, and we came to the house and there sitting on the steps, having been left, looking very forlorn, was a lady who had been one of our employees in the Delta and who had been told to come up to be evacuated, and her husband and her children, and somehow they all piled in, but had I not driven by there to see if anybody was left, they might still be there.

I also remember that at a certain point, probably about three o'clock, we were radioed to come in by the Ambassador's office, because as the day progressed, the city became more and more chaotic, and it was clear that as time went on it was more and more dangerous to be out there, although it did not really fall apart. And as you drove around to some areas of the city, it looked almost normal. For example, I made one last attempt, as I had during the previous days, to look for the brother-in-law of one of our Foreign Service officers, Al Adams, and I went down into the little pathway where their house was. To do that I had to park the van out in front and walk down there. And there in the midst of all this turmoil, life was going on. People were hanging out their wash, and they were doing the other things that you would do on a normal day. I didn't find him, so I left without him.

But anyway, then I went back to the embassy. Joe and I were in different vans at that point. And by that point, the embassy was surrounded by people desperate to get in and become a part of the evacuation. And I had a very hard time getting in. I had to be actually pulled in. One of the side gates was open, and I had to be pulled in by the marines, who were at the same time holding other people out. So I guess I got in there at three or four o'clock, and from then until 9 p.m., when I left, I was in the embassy, up in the Ambassador's suite mostly, watching things happen.

The telephones, by the way, were all still working. I can remember at one point I got a telephone call from a Vietnamese woman who said that they were at such and such a place and didn't know what to do and the buses that were supposed to get there had not come by. It was late by then. It was dark. So I said, "Well, look, the only thing I can tell you to do is to go down to the barges. There are barges." She said, "I'm afraid, I'm afraid to go down there." And I had no better advice. It was a very sad conversation, and we broke off. So it was really a dramatic day.

A little bit of comic relief occurred near the beginning of the day. Somewhere in the early morning, a Protestant missionary came up to the gate. Now at this point there was almost no one on the street, still deserted. I was called down to talk to him through the gate. He was an American, I believe, and he very politely said, "Listen, I don't want to bother anybody. I just want to see if everything's all right," or words to that effect. And I said, "Well, you know, this is probably going to be the last day. We'd be glad to let you join the evacuation. Why don't you come in?" He said, "Oh, I don't want to bother anybody." So finally I said, "Look, you better get in here." And he did.

But one of the saddest things that happened on that day was that the entire contingent from USIS, which was to have been evacuated, was instead abandoned. First of all, all the Vietnamese employees there had been told to stay until the end, and then they would be evacuated. And on the final day they were all told to go to one of their buildings and to wait, and somehow the buses that were supposed to appear there never did, and all these people were left. This was a terribly sad thing.

Alan Carter was the head of USIS, as I've already said, and one of the things that I remember was Alan was wringing his hands, going desperately around the embassy trying to figure out how to get buses to the people. At one point, early on in the day, he was wondering how to get his deputy or one of his officers back from there to the embassy, so I volunteered to go get him, because I knew from having just been out, that it was not dangerous at that point and that there were really very few people on the street. And I did. I went and got him, brought him back to the embassy. But then, none of the rest of those people were saved. And, you know it's amazing. We talked about Martin before, for whom I had a lot of respect, in some ways, but in other ways he could behave badly. And I can remember that after the evacuation Martin was on the ship and he was interviewed. He made some kind of a disparaging remark about Alan Carter and his failure to save his own people, or just enough of an intimation to let it be known that he faulted Carter for this. But at any rate, it was a very dramatic day, and as I said, I left at 9 p.m.

Q: You got out by helicopter.

WRIGHT: By helicopter off the roof, yes.

Q: What was your impression of the evacuation by helicopter?

WRIGHT: Oh, it was incredible. I mean, it was an incredible feat, when you think that-I think there were about-I don't want to over state this because I'm not sure of the figures-but a huge number of us were rescued on that day by those helicopters, which must have made hundreds and hundreds of flights. I think something like 10,000 people left in that way and were taken to the boats. Only one helicopter went down. I don't think any lives were lost. Those two pilots survived. And when you think of the complexity of that operation, the fact that this went on far beyond the time when pilots would ordinarily have been allowed to fly. Much of it was conducted at night. It was a phenomenal logistical feat.

Q: You ended up on what ship?

WRIGHT: I'm trying to think. Was it the Ticonderoga? I believe Martin was on the Blue Ridge. I think it was the Ticonderoga.

Q: I was just thinking, this might be a good point to stop, at this thing, and we'll pick it up, because I would like to get your impressions and all of once you're on the ship. So we've got you on April 30th on the ship the Ticonderoga, and we'll pick it up there.

WRIGHT: All right, great.

Q: Okay, today is the 30th of March, 1998. Lacy we're on the Ticonderoga. Can you describe the scene there and what was happening and what you were doing?

WRIGHT: Well, we seemed to be on there, first of all, forever. I guess it was several days that we were there on the ship before we landed in Manila. Although there was a lot of moving around and unsettledness, I think the mood was overall a bit somber, although I must say that my recollections of the ship ride are not very vivid.

I remember seeing some of the people on the ship that I knew. I'm thinking right now of a general whom I'd known in Vietnam for some time and who had been a province chief in Vietnam and was known as a very upright and charismatic guy who was always admired by the Americans because of his cleanliness and his zeal. He was not always liked by the Vietnamese that he served with. He later tried to go back to Vietnam. He was sent back by a group. This was well after 1975 was over. He tried to go back to Vietnam from Thailand; he was never successful. He was, however, a big success in the United States. I can remember reading newspaper articles about him after he went to California because he started out at the bottom and pretty soon had his own gas station and other businesses, as I recollect, and was one of the early examples of a Vietnamese success story. At any rate, he was on the ship. And I'm not sure that I can remember other people on there. Obviously, there must have been lots of Americans whom I knew and other Vietnamese.

Q: Were you at this early stage-I mean obviously you were terribly busy before, but when you had a little time to reflect-your initial feeling was, What went wrong? Why didn't it work?

WRIGHT: Well, I think we were, in a sense, beyond that. What I tried to do, what I did a little bit of, was write a few notes about what had happened. I think I did that on the ship. They were really very sketchy, though. I still have them, but they're not anything to brag about. I wish now that I had sat down and tried to do a better job of that, but I didn't. But I think that it was kind of a rest after a long period of exhausting work, because in those last two weeks or so we really had little time to do anything except work all day and go back home and go to sleep immediately and get up early the next morning with no time even to write down what you were going through. So it was really a very draining time, and this was a kind of forced rest that we had put upon us, a little bit too much so, as I remember, because, as I said, it seemed like that ship would never get to Manila, where it was supposed to be going.

Q: What happened when you got to Manila?

WRIGHT: I think we were there for two or three days. People then split up. You could go wherever you were going after that. We were processed through the embassy, and I guess we filled out forms and things like this. One of the things I remember-either on the ship or right after we got to Manila-we were asked if we wanted to send messages to anybody, so I asked that one be sent to my dad in Springfield, Illinois, telling him that I was okay, and then I assumed that it was sent. It never was; he never heard anything saying that I was okay, so he worried quite a bit between that point and the time when I finally got in touch with him.

Q: Was there any sort of bond between you-I mean, not just you, but the others, the people who came out of there. Us against them, or any sort of feeling, or were you all going your individual way?

WRIGHT: Well, there was certainly a bond, but I don't know it was as operative at that time as it would become later. I think everyone was probably worried about his or her own situation at that point. For me, and I guess for any of us, now that I think of it, who were in the Foreign Service or in AID or anywhere else in government, our jobs had just disappeared. And so that was one-I won't say preoccupation because I don't think anybody, at least not in the Foreign Service, was worried that he was going to be cut adrift-but we were uncertain as to where it was you were supposed to go next. What I did was to go first to Hong Kong for a few days, and then, because I had no ongoing assignment, I went to Paris, where I stayed for six or eight weeks and studied French and lived with some French people and had a very nice time there and then went back to Washington to work on the new entity that had been set up in the State Department to handle the resettlement of all of the refugees who had come.

Q: Well, you were dealing with the resettlement from when to when?

WRIGHT: The one in Washington?

Q: Yes.

WRIGHT: I guess it must have lasted six weeks or so. It wasn't all that long. This would have been, let us say, from sometime in June of 1975 until July or August.

Q: What were you doing?

WRIGHT: Well, I was a small cog in a very big machine, and one of the things that I did was to attend to the reports-I think we did daily reports to the White House and other parts of the State Department -on how the resettlement effort was going. At that point, the Vietnamese who came out had been funneled into camps in various parts of the country. There were four of them. These were Indiantown Gap, in Pennsylvania; one of them was in Florida, one in Arkansas, and one in California. And these were, I believe, all headed by people who had been in Vietnam, Alan Carter, the head of USIS, was the director of Indiantown Gap, I remember. So the refugees went to one of those places until they could be sponsored out by some American, either some American individual or some group. And that is the way it worked, and gradually all of them were.

Q: How did you find dealing with the White House then?

WRIGHT: Well, I didn't deal with the White House myself, but I think it's fair to say that the Ford White House took a very big interest in this. Needless to say, it was the biggest thing happening at that point. You also had people in the White House, that is, in the NSC, like Ken Quinn, who had been in Vietnam, who had Vietnamese family, who personally were extremely interested in what was happening. So there was, I don't think, any lack of attention from the White House. And actually, I think that one could say in retrospect, that that whole effort, with all its bumps, was quite a good one. There was a policy, an acknowledged policy, of trying to spread the new arrivals around the country in as equitable a manner as possible-equitable, that is, from the point of view of the states, whose social service systems would be burdened in many cases by these new arrivals. And I think that worked fairly well, even though in our country nobody can tell anybody else where to live. So many of the refugees who went to places that they, for one reason or another, considered inhospitable, sooner or later packed their bags and went elsewhere, either to California or perhaps to Texas, where there are a lot of Vietnamese, or to the Washington area. Still, however, to this day, I think you will find all over our country that there are Vietnamese living still from this period. There is a very large group, for example, in Chicago. I would say almost anywhere you go you will find Vietnamese.

Q: In the State Department, how were things working as far as what are they going to do with you and all?

WRIGHT: Well, by then I had my next assignment, which was to go to the economics course, and that lasted for roughly the second half of 1975.

Q: How did you find the course?

WRIGHT: I think it was very good. It was probably, at that point, still overly theoretical, although even at the time I was taking it that had been a common criticism of the course, or comment maybe. And even then they were trying to compensate for that. But I remember, for example, that we spent a lot of time learning calculus, for which I never ever yet once in my life had any use of any kind, certainly not practical, nor can I think of any way in which it insinuated itself into my thought processes in a way that was beneficial.

Q: Well, there's so much emphasis on calculus as saying this is the great door that will open up things. At that time, what was calculus supposed to do for you?

WRIGHT: I don't remember very well, but I guess it was supposed to allow you to understand the different kinds of formulas that were used in economic analysis. And by the way, the purpose of the whole course-and I think it's a correct purpose-was not to make you an economist, which would not have been feasible in the four or five months that the course lasted, but rather to make you conversant with economics, that is, to allow you to pick up the economic section of the newspaper and understand what was happening, and allow you to carry on knowledgeable conversations with people about economics, to understand the economic history of our own country and to be aware and to understand what was going on economically in other countries. And I think, to a large extent, it succeeded in doing that. It was a good course.

Q: During this six months you were sort of out of the Vietnam line of fire-you had finally got out of that-did you find much retrospection or interest within the State Department in Vietnam, what happened?

WRIGHT: Well, that's a good question. There was, of course, still a good deal of thrashing around by people who'd been in Vietnam in one way or another. For example, there was a certain amount of talk about whether people who had gone there would be rewarded symbolically in some way, given any kind of honors. And that was a debate that went on for a while with an initial decision not to and that provoked a lot of criticism on the part of some of the people who were there. There was the start of what later eventually became the book about the fall of Saigon, called *Decent Interval*, by Frank Snepp. Frank at that point was still in the CIA. He was, however, thinking of, starting, in fact, to write his book. I remember he and I met at some function once, and he was talking to me about how concerned he was about his own position in his organization. And he appeared to have a good case of paranoia at that point, which, I think, eventually proved the truth of Kissinger's dictum, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you." And they turned out to be very much after Frank Snepp.

Q: Because the book was published, and then the money was confiscated and it was supposedly withdrawn, but the book is basically part of the public record now.

WRIGHT: Absolutely. In a way, it was unfair to Snepp. First of all, I think Snepp wrote a magnificent book. His book is extremely well written. Journalists have told me they would love to have written that book, just from the stylistic point of view. It's written in an exciting way. I think it has a lot of little errors in it. I think that's partly due to the fact that there was such a large sweep to the events that are being described, but also more fundamentally due to the fact that so many of the events that were related to events by different people were related in different ways, and indeed, opposite ways. The most glaring example that I can think of has to do with the case of Consul General Terry McNamara in Can Tho, when he came out of the country by boat and took his staff with him in what was really a tremendous adventure, and he has to be given a terrific amount of credit for that. He's just written a very good book about it, by the way.

Q: Escape With Honor.

WRIGHT: Escape With Honor, which I haven't finished because somebody borrowed it and didn't return it, but what I did read of it I really thought was excellent. It was well done, and it's a good book. But from Snepp's point of view, here's a case where you had the consul general in Can Tho, Terry McNamara, and his station chief, whose name I forget, coming out of the same experience, each one accusing the other of having skipped out and left the other and his men behind-diametrically opposed versions of what happened, blame placed by the one on the other and by the other on the one. It's a good example of how hard it is to get to the truth in these very emotional and dramatic situations that Snepp was trying to describe. So I think that's part of it. But overall, Snepp's book was a terrific effort. Now, I'm told, it is the standard work on the subject, of what happened at the end in Vietnam, and always will be. So Snepp really has to be congratulated.

Of course, I think that Snepp ran into the trouble that he did with the CIA in large part because he was a victim of timing. Don't forget that this was after Philip Agee had caused the CIA a tremendous amount of grief and put individual CIA officers in a great deal of danger by his revelations. I think there were a couple of other instances where former CIA people had written about the Agency in ways that the Agency found dangerous or repugnant or both. And I think that it is very probably that by the time that Snepp came along, the people in charge of the Agency were saying to themselves, "We can't let somebody get away with this again. We have to come down on them hard." That's all the more unfortunate for Snepp, I think, because no one ever accused Snepp, as far as I know, of revealing any classified information. There's not one charge of that that I have ever heard. He's simply accused of the legalistic sin of having violated his commitment to the Agency not to print anything without the Agency's review.

And I thought that it was ironic that later Bill Colby wrote his own memoirs, a book called Honorable Men, of which I think he was certainly one-he was a wonderful person and a man of tremendous intelligence and insight-but at any rate, he wrote memoirs which seemed to me in some instances to have gone far more vividly into things that I would not have gone into than Snepp ever did. For example, in his writings about Italy, Bill Colby talks fairly openly about our efforts to keep Communists out of power and about, as I remember, individual members of the Italian Government that we were dealing with. Well, the problem was that at that point a lot of those people were still around, so I was very much surprised at that, and I don't think anything ever happened or even was said to Colby about that. So again, all the more ironic that Snepp suffered fairly grievously over his book, never made any money out of it, spent years of his life struggling against the CIA in court, eventually lost, and so paid a big price for a book which was, I think, very good. And I think maybe the most unfortunate thing about is that this experience really went on to color Snepp's life in a very profound way and, I think, still does.

Q: Well, after you left the economic course-we're talking about the beginning of '76-whither?

WRIGHT: Well, first of all, whither? I met my wife about that time, or re-met my wife. I had known her slightly in Vietnam. She was well known at the American Embassy because she was, first of all, the widow of Nguyen Van Bong, who was an opposition politician and academic of real stature, who was assassinated by the Communists, his car blown up in late 1971. So as a widow, Jackie was asked by Ambassador Bunker, who always remained her great friend, to become the head of the cultural affairs part of the VAA, the Vietnamese-American Association. So in that capacity, she put on all kinds of events for that organization, art shows, recitals, concerts, of which there were many, because in those days Vietnam was the biggest diplomatic establishment in the world, and so there were all kinds of performers and artists who came through and who did things of this nature. And the Vietnamese American Association as a whole was a huge enterprise. The language teaching part of it had something like 25,000 students, so it was very much an active concern.

So I knew Jackie very slightly in that role, although not very well, and I did not meet her again and really get to know her until the summer of 1975, when I ran into her one day across the street from the State Department and had the good sense to ask her for her telephone number. And then Jackie and I dated and eventually became engaged and were married the following year in the spring. But in the meantime, I had been assigned to Milan, Italy, where I went in, I think, January of 1976, where Jackie and then her children eventually joined me.

Q: So you were '76 to when in Milan?

WRIGHT: '76 to '78.

Q: What were you doing in Milan?

WRIGHT: I was the deputy to the consul general.

Q: Who was the consul general?

WRIGHT: His name was Tom Fina, whom I admired a great deal, and we had very good tour there. It was a time when we had to make a lot of adjustments. I was just married. Jackie was not only in a new marriage but also in a new country. Our children had been in the United States then for about a year, and they were again uprooted. So they had all that to contend with. I think, though, that we liked Italy and stayed there for about two and a half years and then came back to the United States.

Q: Let's talk a bit about Italy in '76. How would you describe the situation as you saw it from the perspective of Milan.

WRIGHT: These were dramatic days for the Italians because of the Red Brigades. There was a real reign of terror going on, which, thankfully, did not directly touch Americans-at least not until General Dozier was kidnapped a couple of years later-but which very much had Italians at their wit's end, I would say. People that we knew, a journalist, for example, from the *Corriere della sera* was eventually killed, a year or so after I left Milan. A couple of people that I knew had their kneecaps shot. People who were wealthy lived in especial terror, because they were worried about being kidnapped for ransom, as a number of them were. I remember once that Tom Fina went to a dinner at the apartment of someone wealthy in Milan and at one point there was a telephone call for the host, and he came back into the room and he informed everyone that someone whom they all knew had been kidnapped. And it became clear to Fina that this was a subject of constant preoccupation for these people. He said he turned to the lady on his left and he said, "How many people do you know personally who have been kidnapped?" And she ticked off four or five. And he did the same thing to the lady on his right. And I can remember going out to the home outside of Milan of Silvio Berlusconi, who later became the Italian prime minister-even then extremely wealthy. And he lived in a French Tudor villa outside of Milan totally surrounded by guards. In fact, either he said this or I thought it, he had practically a Sicilian village living in his courtyard, armed. He told me that he didn't send his children to school. He had tutors brought in to teach them.

So, anyway, that was the climate in Italy at that time from a political point of view. And then this was all capped by the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, who, as you remember, was killed by the Red Brigades, and his body was found in the trunk of a car in downtown Rome. And I remember vividly when that occurred because the American Ambassador at that time, Richard Gardiner, was visiting Milan, and we were in a restaurant having lunch with a politician named Spadolini. Spadolini later himself became prime minister of Italy. He was not at that point even a minister. And we were at Savini, which is a very nice restaurant, an old and classical restaurant in the Galleria near the Duomo in downtown Milan. And our group was on one side of the table and Spadolini's on the other. Our group were three people, I believe, Gardiner, Tom Fina and myself, and during the lunch, I was called out by a telephone call from the consulate. And I was told by my secretary that the radio had just announced that Moro's body had been found. No one, of course, up until that point, knew that he had been killed, until his body was found. And so I went back to the table, and I went over to Gardiner and stood next to him and whispered this to him, and he did not want to call this across the table to Spadolini, and he asked me to walk around the table and inform Spadolini, which I did. So these were dramatic times in Italy.

Q: What was our analysis and the Italian analysis of what were the Red Brigades? Who were they, and what did they want?

WRIGHT: They were a group of people who, by the way, had links with other revolutionary kinds of groups in other parts of the world, in the Middle East, in Germany. It's an interesting question partially because many Italians refuse to believe that this was a home-grown group of people. Many Italians seriously would tell you that no Italian would do something like this. At least, not unless he was totally influenced by somebody else, so it was hard for Italians themselves to believe that people could get so riled up over a kind of revolutionary cause to impel them to engage in this kind of violence. I might also say that the Italians eventually decimated the Red Brigades, and I think this is something we often fail to remember about the Italians. Sometimes we don't take the Italians as seriously as we ought to. Sometimes we forget that they have been tremendous allies of ours, both in the political military arena, when they were the people in the 1970's who installed the missiles that we wanted them to when no one else would, but also in this instance, where, you know, everybody preaches that "We're not going to deal with terrorists-we're not going to negotiate with them." But most of us break that rule when the crunch comes. It needs to be pointed out that when the crunch came for the Italians, when their own prime minister was in the hands of the Red Brigades, a man whose party was in power, was totally part of the political establishment, whose wife was calling out every day to implore the government to relax its policy and deal with these people, the Italian Government held absolutely firm, allowed, if I can be put that way-it's probably unfair to put it that way-we shouldn't say they "allowed" Moro to be killed-but stood firm in the policies that they did and then, later, by the way, went out and totally mopped up the Red Brigades. That calls for real backbone of a national nature, and they did it.

Q: Was there any feel that these Red Brigades had a viable agenda?

WRIGHT: No, I don't think so. I don't remember now what their manifestos said. Certainly there was plenty wrong with Italy as a society, just as there is with a lot of societies. Much of this came out and was addressed subsequently, say, in the past seven or eight years, when the parties themselves were pretty much decimated in the wake of all kinds of scandals, in which many politicians had their careers ruined, and many of them actually went to jail and some of them actually committed suicide. So there was a good deal of corruption in the Italian system. There's no doubt about that. It was the way things were done. There was plenty of reason for criticism about favoritism, about money changing hands, and so on; and so, in that sense, there were lots of legitimate complaints that could have been made about Italy and its political and social system. But nothing justified the ruthlessness with which the Red Brigades attacked things, and certainly no reason to believe that had the Red Brigades prevailed things would have gotten better.

Q: On the local level, what was the form of government that you were dealing with, and how did you all find it?

WRIGHT: In Milan, there was a coalition of the Communists and the Socialists-I forget the term for it now-with the Socialists, who were the smaller party, on top. That is, the mayor was Socialist. I can't remember how many cabinet posts the Communists had and how many the Socialists had, but the Socialists would have had more and they would have had the mayor. Then the city was part of a province, and the province was part of a region. Certainly the regional government was Christian-Democratic, and the head of that was a Christian-Democrat. The provincial government, I'm not sure-but that was probably the least important of the three. The most important government in Milan was the city government. The mayor during most of the time that I was there was a man named Carlo Tognioli, a Socialist, and Tognioli was a man of short stature-a very short person, very self-effacing, nice man, a terrific reputation as a good guy-and, in fact, remained mayor of Milan for about 10 years, which is an unheard-of length of time for a politician to be in that kind of a post in Italy. When the kind of revolution came-and this by the way had the nickname mani pulite, 'clean hands'-almost the entire Socialist Party was swept up in this because it probably was the most corrupt of all the parties, and so was poor Carlo Tognioli, which I think was an injustice because I don't think that he was at all a corrupt person, and I think he did a very good job as mayor. But he was caught up in this as well.

Q: What was the prevailing impression that you were getting, from your own view, from Fina, and from the embassy, of the Italian Communist Party and what was it's agenda and importance?

WRIGHT: Well, this was a very hot debate at that time, both in Italy and within the US Government, and there were different views on it. Our policy was, of course, keep the Communists out at any cost-well, I shouldn't say at any cost; that wouldn't be right. But our policy was that we did not want to see the Communists become a part of the Italian Government. People within our government, however, some of them, thought that this was too harsh; they thought that, first of all, the Communists were going to eventually get into the Italian Government. They called its policy and the reality was that they were going to get in via "salami tactics": a little bit at a time. And indeed, that is what happened, eventually. And that when they did get in it would be better for us to have been seen to have dealt with them than not to. We would retain our principles. We would not change the things that we thought were right, but we would not be kicking and screaming all of the way.

I think the cards history eventually dealt were these. As of, say, 1976-77, the people who were saying that they're going to get in and we'd better start dealing with them greatly underestimated the length of time that it would take them to get in. And so probably in retrospect one can say, no, there was no reason why we should have helped them at all to come into power in Italy. But eventually they did, and they are today still a force in Italy. How nefarious or not the Communists were is, I guess, probably still a matter for debate. I don't follow this very much any more. I don't know what the prevailing wisdom is on this subject, but I think that from the point of view of American interests it would have been very unlikely that the entry of the Communists into an Italian Government, say in the 1970's or the 1980's, would have been good for us. They could hardly have failed to oppose us, particularly on things like the installation of the missiles in Italy and on foreign policy matters. On the other hand, they were probably never as dangerous or as much against our interests as some people portrayed them.

Q: You were, I assume, acting sort of as an economic officer and political officer over there. Were you allowed to have contact with the Communists?

WRIGHT: That was another sensitive question. Yes and no. I believe that this changed a bit during the time that I was there, but I can remember at least at one point that we could call on the Communists if they were in a government position, not if they were only in a party position, although maybe even that changed while I was there.

Q: What was your impression of Richard Gardiner as Ambassador.

WRIGHT: Gardiner was, first of all, a very accomplished man. I don't think he was formally an economist, but he was a man who knew a lot about the economy, a lot about economic policy, and a man who worked very hard, took his job very seriously, performed in public a great deal, studied Italian very hard and very seriously, and got to be quite good in Italian, but was always very careful not to overextend himself so that he got into a situation where he might say something wrong or something foolish or not say something well. That is, he continued for some time to use an interpreter, but actually he was studying all this time, and when he did speak, he made sure that he could do the job well, and he did.

Even though before he arrived it was rumored, it was reported, that he would take a less tough line toward the Communists, he did not. And whether that was out of conviction or because he was faithfully carrying out the policy of the Jimmy Carter Government, I guess you'd have to ask him. But he turned out to support a very tough policy against the Communists.

Q: Other than the Red Brigades, were there any other issues that had the attention of the Consulate General?

WRIGHT: In those days, the all-consuming question, from a political point of view, about Italy, and especially if you were an American, was the Communist question. It really colored everything, and it was the focus, I would say, of most of our reporting. Tom Fina was an excellent political and economic reporter, and we did a lot of reporting from Milan, some of which got us into a little bit of trouble with the embassy, because the embassy was always worried that we were overstepping our bounds, that is, reporting on Italy from a national point of view rather than from a consulate point of view. And so we were always up against that invisible boundary. This was made a worse dilemma, from the embassy's point of view, because Fina's reporting was superb. Fina had a knack with words which made his reports extremely readable and interesting, as well as solid. And we used to do reports on the provinces. Either he would go out or I would go out and spend the day in a province, by car usually, go around and see eight or ten people, the mayor, head of the local union, the local bishop, and so on, and then come back and make a report out of it. So we, I would say, knew that area, from a political point of view, pretty well, and we had a very good reputation for our reporting at the Department in those days.

Q: What about the economic side? What was the impression of Italy as far as what was being done in Milan and Italy's role in the economic world?

WRIGHT: Clearly, even in those days, Italy was an economic power which was often underestimated by people. I think in those days, Italy was something like the seventh biggest industrial economy in the world. It around that time had passed up the British and had passed up the French. One of the features of the Italian economy, however, always was the degree to which it was politicized. And again, this is something that came out during the Clean Hands campaign. You know the Italian parties in those days controlled everything. Much of the Italian economy had been nationalized. You had the national oil company, telecommunications, all this was nationalized, and the jobs in those companies, that is, the big managerial jobs, were doled out by the parties. And by the way, each part of this economic structure was known to be in the hands of one party or another. So for example, in Milan, La Scala was the preserve of the Socialists. Now that meant that if you wanted free tickets to La Scala, you got them from Socialist politicians. It also meant that if you wanted to be the superintendent of La Scala you had to be chosen by the Socialists. You could be the greatest musician in the world, and that was nice, but if you were not in with the Socialist Party, your chances were close to zero. And this pervaded the whole Italian economy. So if you wanted-I forget which is which now-but let us say that ENI, the national oil company, Ente Nazionale d'Italia, or something, I forget. The head of ENI was-I think that was Socialist-appointed by the Socialists. Now it's clear that that is not the best way to run an economy, and I suspect it's changed a good deal now. So in a way, you can look at it either way. You can say it's amazing they did so well with this kind of a system, or you could say that they might have done a lot better had they been choosing people on merit rather than the way that they did. But there was a great deal of prosperity in Italy at that time, particularly in the North-well, you've always had the North-South split, as far as that goes, and in those days, just as probably now, the national government was pouring huge amounts of money into the South, in an effort to raise living standards there, and the people in the North were doing extremely well.

Q: You remarked that you had this system which eventually was found out and everybody knew that there was considerable corruption within the system, being a political one, obviously there were payoffs, if not in cash, in jobs and that sort of thing. How did we feel about reporting on this?

WRIGHT: I don't remember this all that well. Certainly we reported on corruption. I think that just as in many countries where the Foreign Service is, the people at the top of the embassy got nervous when they started thinking that people were going overboard.

Q: You mean our people going overboard in reporting on corruption.

WRIGHT: Yes. I'm trying to recall some instances of this and I'm not doing it right now. I think we had the same phenomenon in Vietnam, but certainly we reported on corruption in Italy, of which there was a great deal, but I think that the embassy was probably sensitive to the danger that zealous Foreign Service officers might go overboard and become investigative journalists. If they had, there was plenty of material.

Q: Well, you left there in '78; you went back to Washington, is that right? Where did you go in Washington?

WRIGHT: I became the Italian Desk officer, that is, the officer in charge of Italian affairs. There were two of us covering Italy at that time in the office of EUR-WE, Western Europe.

Q: And you were that from '78 to when?

WRIGHT: '78 to '80.

Q: You were still in the Carter years here.

WRIGHT: That's right.

Q: What was the major concern during the time you were on the Italian Desk?

WRIGHT: Communists in Italy. I wouldn't say that that changed. It evolved perhaps a little bit, but it didn't change during those years.

Q: Was the missile issue part of this, too? The Soviets had introduced the SS-20, which was a missile designed to hit Western Europe, and we felt we had to counter that with our Pershing missiles and Cruise missiles, and those became a very hot issue. Did you get involved in that?

WRIGHT: Yes, it was a very hot issue, and I alluded to it before by saying that the Italians were almost alone in Europe, certainly the first, in allowing us to place our missiles on their territory.

Q: Was there any sort of maneuvering that you'd noticed or quid pro quos or anything else like this?

WRIGHT: That's a good question, and I'm not sure I have a very good answer for it. We had, I would say, a unique relationship with Italy, a very close relationship in a lot of ways because there were so many Italo-Americans in the United States and Italo-American groups. And that relationship went on and within that relationship, of course, there are all kinds of nice things that the United States can do for a country. It can say yes when their leader wants to see the President, for example. Or when lower level leaders come here, it can say yes when they ask for appointments with people. I don't think, though, that we did anything dramatic or even notable for the Italian Government in exchange for this. For example, I can remember at one point-I wouldn't call this the Italian Government-but people within the government were very anxious for more American investment, so they wanted us to send them American businessmen. This is a common misconception about the United States, which is that when the US Government wants to encourage private investment in another country, it just calls up some businessmen and tells them to invest. That's not the way it works, and so we simply told that to the Italians. "This isn't the way our system works. We'll be glad to help if you can attract businessmen, but you've got to do it." So that's one of the ways we were not able to do something that the Italians wanted us to do.

Much, I think, though, of what the Italians wanted from us was on the symbolic rather than the real level. The Italians-and I can't speak for them now, because I've been out of touch with Italian affairs, but certainly in those days-the Italians had a national inferiority complex, which often came to the fore. It was often operative. And often what they wanted was to be included in a meeting, included in a summit. Their constant fear was to be excluded from a meeting which included the big guys in Europe. Their constant obsession was to be left out of a summit of the British, the French, the Germans and the Americans.

Q: And the Canadians, who also have the same problem.

WRIGHT: And this bothered them a great deal. This sensitivity of the Italians about being left out of the big people, the big group in Europe has come back in the last year in the form of the Security Council reform in the United Nations, wherein we are supporting Security Council membership for the Japanese, the Germans and, I think, the representatives of three regions to be determined by the regions themselves, for a total of five or maybe six new members. The Italians are just aghast at this, and the Italian Perm-Rep, the permanent representative, in New York made a wonderfully facetious comment when referring to the Japanese and the Germans. He said, "Hey, wait a minute! We lost the war too."

Q: Tell me, I remember reading in Henry Kissinger's book, *The White House Years*, he referred to flying into Rome and saying that everything was symbolic, but there was no, sort of, "the Leader" to talk to in Italy, and that the governments are continually revolving-the same people-but it wasn't as though there were a figure, a man for our President to deal with, or the Secretary of State or what have you. Was this hard to deal with, to get across? I mean, there just wasn't "Mr. Italy."

WRIGHT: What year would that have been, do you remember?

Q: It would be during his White House years, which would have been in the early '70's, I suppose, but I'm thinking of this even later or even earlier. I mean, Andreotti would come in and out, but it wasn't as though you were going in and talking to de Gaulle or talking to Adenauer or somebody. The Japanese have somewhat the same problem.

WRIGHT: I guess it's a problem, now that you bring it up, and I suppose it's manifested in the need for any Italian premier to vet any big decision with the other parties. I suppose the closest you've come away from this, paradoxically now, is with Craxi, who lasted about two years and was a very strong Socialist prime minister, but certainly, the Christian Democrats, who until recently, were the dominant party in the postwar period, very dominant, even they were constantly vetting things with Communists, constantly, to our great discomfiture. We wanted them to do this and wanted them to do that, and they claimed to want it, too. I guess one of the things it did was to make it unclear to us a lot of the time whether the Christian Democrats wanted something or were simply using the refusal of the Communists or the Socialists to say they couldn't do it. But, yes, that was a fairly constant feature of Italian foreign policy.

And again, another way of putting this is that Italian foreign policy is very much an adjunct to Italian domestic policy. How many Italian foreign ministers can you name? Probably not very many, because they never became really national figures, or they tended not to become really national figures. And Italian foreign policy would always have been, in those years, subordinated to domestic policy, and where the United States was concerned, even though the communists were out of power nominally, they would have had, because of this feature of Italian politics, a lot of say-so in what the Italian Government agreed to with us.

Q: During this period, from '79 to '81, I was in Naples as consul general, and I had never served in Italy before, and so was sort of looking at this as the new boy on the block. In the back of my mind I keep thinking, My God, we're reporting in exclusive detail on this parliamentary merry-go-round that keeps changing but hasn't changed since 1948 practically. And I thought, we had people on their fourth or fifth tours-or it seemed that way-in Italy, and they've gotten so involved in this, and really we were putting far greater detail and were getting more involved in the "Have the Communists moved up one percentage point?" or "What is this and that?" Really, as far as I was concerned, for the Mezzogiorno, southern Italy, the real problem was getting jobs. Even the mayor of Naples, Valenzi, who was a Communist, wanted to make sure the Sixth Fleet didn't leave the area. Did you ever get that feeling about this?

WRIGHT: Oh, yes. It was totally self-absorbing. I mean, you got caught up in this analysis of how far the Communists had gotten and what were the other parties doing, and it was a whole subject of human endeavor in itself. Well, you know, even to read the Italian newspapers, I was always struck by the fact that in order to read the typical upper-crust Italian newspaper about political matters, you had to be tremendously well-schooled in Italian politics because nobody ever explained anything. None of these papers would ever, for example, say, "Giulio Andreotti, three-time prime minister of Italy and four times minister of foreign affairs." No, if you were reading the paper, you were supposed to know that. And then even more esoteric things: when they referred to the events of June 6th, well, you either knew that they meant June 6, 1964, when 18 people gathered together in a town in southern Italy and said something, or you didn't. And so it was like reading a coded message, and if you didn't have the code, you couldn't read it. And that's just always the way that Italian politics were described. So a person coming in from the outside couldn't have read about Italian politics with any kind of understanding because you wouldn't know what they were talking about.

Q: What about the Italo-Americans in the United States. We had an earthquake when I was in southern Italy, and I'd never realized how many congressmen with Italian names were around. They all descended on me at one time, immediately. But these were people generally from southern areas, Sicily, the poor areas, who really weren't plugged into or knowledgeable about the real events that were occurring in the North, the major political events. Did you find that they played much of a role in our dealing with Italy?

WRIGHT: Well, a bit of a role, yes. For example, there's something called the Italian-American Foundation, which I think is still very much around, and which has a number of prominent Italo-Americans in it. I can't think of the man who was the head while I was there. We always regarded this organization as a bit retrograde in upholding views about Italy that were in large part nostalgic-very anti-Communist, as I remember, and not particularly relevant. However, I can tell you, when the Italian-American Foundation every year has its big dinner in Washington, it invites the President and the Vice-President, and they often come. But I don't think that when it comes to the really big ticket questions, like theater nuclear forces, for example, that they play much of a role. I think that they play a kind of on-the-ground role, if somebody who comes from Italy and the Italian-American Foundation really wants somebody in the White House to see them, I suppose that they can probably get that done. But I think that that is often the level that they operate at. Or if there is a disaster in Italy and collecting money, things like that. So I think that's largely the way it is. I think on the big ticket items they don't count for much.

Q: Well then you left the Italian desk in 1980, and then what?

WRIGHT: Then I went to be the director of something which was then called the Kampuchea Working Group. I did that for a year and a half. And this was a kind of task force which was set up to respond to the tragic events in Cambodia and Thailand at the end of 1980, when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and sent hundreds of thousands of Cambodians fleeing into Thailand.

Q: Well, who headed this and how was it organized, first. You were doing this, by the way, from 1980 to-

WRIGHT: Let's see, end of '81.

Q: Shall we stop?

WRIGHT: Is that all right?

Q: Sure, that's fine. Why don't we stop at this point? And we'll pick this up when you're dealing with this Kampuchea working group, which was starting in 1980, and we haven't gotten into this at all..

Today is the 10th of April, 1998. So you were assigned to the Kampuchea Working Group.

WRIGHT: that's right.

Q: You were doing it from when to when?

WRIGHT: I did it for a year and a half, from about June of 1980 to the end of 1981.

Q: Okay, what was the Kampuchea Working Group. What was the genesis?

WRIGHT: The genesis was the catastrophe that befell the Cambodians in the wake of the Pol Pot years, when the Vietnamese, at the end of 1979, invaded Cambodia. Now one has to have mixed feelings about that, because they were able to drive the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh, which I think any right-thinking person has to regard as a good thing, but at the same time, they took over the country, which we regarded as a bad thing, and even worse, they created a huge number of Cambodian refugees, whom we didn't want to call refugees-whom we called displaced persons-who were, whatever you called them, pushed to the Thai border, most of them across the border into Thailand.

Q: Well, now, what was the group working on? Was it on the relief of this mass of refugees? Was it trying to do something about the situation in Cambodia? It is now called Kampuchea, I believe?

WRIGHT: That's right. During that period it was called Kampuchea. We were doing relief, and the United States Government put up a great deal of money to feed and house these displaced people, and this was funneled mostly-well there were two main channels of effort going on, I guess. One had to do with the agencies of the UN system, principally the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, assisted, by the way, by the ICRC, the International Committee of the Red Cross, which, by the way, is not part of the UN system but is an international organization, and UNICEF. UNICEF was very much involved.

Q: UNICEF, the United Nations Committee for what?

WRIGHT: Let me see, anyway the C stands for children. And it's based in New York, as you know. The other part of the effort had to do with voluntary organizations, many of them-probably most of them-American, but not totally. There were organizations from other countries there too, mostly based in Bangkok, and a very large number of them-I don't remember the exact number now, but probably upwards of a hundred at the height of this disaster-so our job was to funnel out our own money to the international organizations involved and, in some instances, to the voluntary organizations, like Catholic charities and various other agencies in the United States that are concerned with refugees and relief.

The other thing that we did was to do a lot of reporting on the situation there, not so much the political situation but the relief situation. And there was plenty to report about. I would say that another part of our effort was protection of these refugees. Now protection involved not only feeding and clothing these people but also trying to do what we could to assure their physical safety. These camps were very, very large places. I believe that Khao-I-Dang Camp reached several hundred thousand people at its height. You can imagine that in those kinds of conditions, with law and order having largely broken down and with so many other social problems coming to the fore at that moment, there was a good deal of lawlessness. There were many incidents in which minor warlords within these camps would take them over or take over parts of them, and so this was a constant problem. Probably, when we looked at it in a cold blooded way, statistically, even though there were murders in the camps, there were other kinds of violence... I remember at one point we compared this to the conditions, as far as we could determine them statistically, in Thailand as a whole, and they weren't as bad. That also means that Thailand was pretty bad-its murder rate, for example. But it probably also means that despite appeals of alarm from a number of the organizations that worked there who saw these things first hand, they were not an extraordinarily high level, given the fact that in any society, including in a place like Thailand, a certain amount of violence exists anywhere. But at any rate, that was one of our main problems, and it was a subject of a good deal of scrutiny by our own Congress, people like Steve Solarz, Democrat then from New York, and others, as well as by these agencies themselves, whose job in life it was to look after refugees. So we were constantly under pressure to do better, rightly so, with regard to the displaced people.

By the way, the distinction between a refugee and a displaced person is an extremely important one here. A refugee had the opportunity to be resettled in another country. He or she was a person who, according to the UN definition, had suffered persecution in his country of origin, and one of the options for such a person was to be resettled in another country. In part for political reasons, because we had just had these waves mostly of Vietnamese refugees who had kind of saturated the market for refugees in the world, and also because, I think, we genuinely thought that the Cambodians would probably want to go back to Cambodia and one day could go back to Cambodia. They were categorized as displaced persons. This too was a constant source of friction and contention between the US Government and various humanitarian groups.

Q: What were the humanitarian groups pushing for?

WRIGHT: Well, I wouldn't say they were all pushing with one voice, but first of all, they were all pushing for the best possible treatment of the displaced people-that was not in dispute-but some of them were pushing for some of them to be considered as refugees, and indeed, eventually, some of them were. These began to do this and to make pretty contorted distinctions among people, and often kind of arbitrary ones. People who had arrived before a certain date could be considered refugees; people who had arrived the next day were displaced people. And so there was a certain amount of that, and that was seen as unfair, as indeed, if you were one of the people involved, it probably was, and so on and so on.

Another thing that complicated the matter was that there were also camps for Vietnamese boat people who had washed up on the shores of southern Thailand. Some of them were separate camps, all by themselves, but in another instance, in Site II, as it was called, which was another huge camp, maybe 100,000 people, there was an enclave (inside of Site II) of Vietnamese refugees. Now there is a situation which is perfectly capable of exploding at any moment because the Vietnamese and the Cambodians, first of all, don't like one another and, secondly, the people in the Vietnamese enclave could be resettled in the United States, the people in the rest of this sprawling camp could not. So there were all kinds of problems. The efforts that then went on-although I just realized in the describing of this I am skipping ahead probably into one of my later jobs, so let me stick back with the Kampuchea Group.

During that time, the effort was mostly to keep these people alive. There was, of course, a political aspect to it. It had to do with the Khmer Rouge. The United States was put in the very difficult position because, on the one hand, we were, of course, against the Khmer Rouge because of the atrocities that they had committed; on the other hand, they were the enemy of our enemy, the Vietnamese. They were also in charge of people. That is, they ran some camps along the Thai-Cambodian border on the Cambodian side. So in many instances, at many times, the question was, Do you feed the people in these camps and thereby lend support, aid and comfort, to the Khmer Rouge, or do you let them starve? And there were people passionately on both sides of this question. By and large, we chose to feed them, and then, of course, our adversaries accused us of coddling the Khmer Rouge, which they regarded as a terrible thing to do. So that was a constant leitmotif throughout this.

Q: Were there any signs that the Khmer Rouge had begun to accept the responsibilities of power?

WRIGHT: I wouldn't put it that way, but one has to ask, who is they? The Khmer Rouge was always a very shadowy group of people, and it's probably a little too much to think that they had, let us say, a government in exile and ministers and all that kind of apparatus, although I think sometimes they did have people who were called those, but these were people out living in the most primitive conditions in camps that they had set up and that they were defending. So it takes a kind of leap of imagination to think of them as a government. Nonetheless, your question is a good one, and it added to the ambiguity of the situation, because sometimes it did appear as though the people in these camps were being modestly well treated by the Khmer Rouge running the camps, despite their atrocious past. So that, as I say, lent some more ambiguity to the situation.

One of the litmus tests that was often applied to this situation was whether the people living in the camps, ordinary people, wanted to escape and whether they would escape if they could. And sometimes, observing the situation, one came up with one answer and sometimes in another camp with another answer. But that too, if you had a situation where people were not trying to flee and where they did seem to be getting the aid that was being sent there, that lent support to the arguments of the people who said, "We can't let these people starve. We ought to feed them like other people."

Q: What about the parts of Cambodia that had been taken over by the Vietnamese? How were things being done there?

WRIGHT: I'm not sure I can answer that any more with much enlightenment. There were, of course, vast parts of the country that were in the hands of the Vietnamese. One of the constant questions during that two- or three- year period was how much rice and other foods, but mostly rice, can the Cambodians grow for themselves, and therefore, how much has to be provided by the international community? This, by the way, brings up another point of contention: should the international community, with our help or with our acquiescence, be feeding people in the interior of Cambodia, who, after all, were being ruled by the Vietnamese, who were our adversaries? And there were people in our Congress and elsewhere who said no, we should not be. As I remember it, we certainly acquiesced in the deliveries of rice to the interior of Cambodia and I think we paid for a certain amount of it. But to get back to what I was saying, one of the efforts was to try to cut down on the amount that was needed from the international community by encouraging the growing of rice inside Cambodia. This was in large part in the hands of the FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization, based in Rome, which had a big role in the interior of Cambodia. So they had to deal, of course, with the Vietnamese, who were running the place, as well as with the Cambodians, and that effort, as I remember it, had a certain amount of success.

Q: What was your role particularly in this?

WRIGHT: Well, I was the director of the Kampuchea Working Group. We probably had, at any given time, maybe eight or ten people attached to us, some of them Foreign Service officers, some of them AID people, and it was a group that was constantly shifting and changing in its composition as people came and went. There was a group in New York of the international agencies and organizations, which was headed for a while by Sir Robert Jackson and of which UNICEF was a lead agency, and it was an effort to coordinate the activities of all the players, particularly the large international organizations. And they had pledging conferences and they had other kinds of meetings in New York, so one of our efforts was to follow these meetings very closely, be in touch with all the people involved, go to the meetings, report on them for the State Department and other agencies of our government-that was one of the things that we did. We also did the same kind of thing with regard to the voluntary agencies, which had their own organization in New York, of which Julia Taft was the head for a while, in fact, recently, I think. So we would sometimes go to their meetings. During the course of this, I made trips to Thailand, trips to Rome, to Geneva-not a large number I don't think-because people or agencies in those places were all involved in this effort.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Thais with this mass of people on their borders?

WRIGHT: Difficult. The Thais, before I went to Thailand, which I did later, I was given a very good piece of advice by one of my teachers of Thai here at FSI, who was not a very good teacher of Thai, but he did leave me this one piece of wisdom. He said, "Don't forget when you get to Thailand that whatever you do to a Thai he will do back twice to you. If you are nice to him, he will be twice as nice to you, and if you are not nice to him..." The Thais can be extremely gracious, normally are extremely gracious. They have the best hotels in the world, I believe, for that reason, because they have this tremendous capacity for service and for making one feel good. At the same time, they have a very dark side, as is attested to by their murder rate, which is very, very high. That by way of introduction. The Thais, of course, did not want Cambodians on their soil, let alone Vietnamese on their soil. They made that extremely well known to us. We, on the other hand, for humanitarian and other reasons, wanted these people taken care of, and the only option that we saw was for them to be taken care of in Thailand. So we had to try to reach an agreement with the Thai Government for this to happen. And it did happen, albeit fairly grudgingly by the Thais. The Thais were very fond of being sanctimonious about all they were doing, and in some cases that may have been justified, but for the most part we were spending, of course, a very large amount of money in Thailand to take care of these people, and the Thai, on the other hand, were constantly setting up regulations which wreaked hardship on the people involved, not to mention the various kinds of chicanery and corruption that would normally go on in any kind of a situation like that and which did, indeed, go on in Thailand.

So, for example, none of the displaced people was ever allowed to leave the camp, and if such a person did, if he were found wandering around alone in Thailand-which happened from time to time-he was put in jail. And I've been to that jail in Bangkok, and believe me, it's not a nice place to be. And the Thai were pretty unrelenting about this. And we were often involved, for one reason or another, in trying to get somebody out of one of these jails or trying to convince the Thai to treat the people more leniently. Sometimes this was because such a person had a defender in the US Congress who wrote to us about him or her or for some similar reason we got drawn into it. So we were constantly talking to the Thai about better treatment for these displaced people and Vietnamese refugees.

Q: Well, while you were doing this, and particularly dealing with the Thais, there had to be an end plan. In other words, you had the Vietnamese, who were sort of our enemies, suddenly controlling most of the country. You had this amorphous group the Khmer Rouge, which were beyond the pale for any civilized party to deal with. And in a way no particular end in sight. And then you had these refugees and displaced people sitting in Thailand and also straddling the border. This sounds as open-ended as one can get.

WRIGHT: Yes, that's what the Thais thought. And by the way, your question has just reminded me. There was another curiosity ascribed to the Thai treatment of these people, and that was that, on the one hand, the Thai wanted people to be resettled because they wanted them out of there in any ways they could; on the other hand, they knew that if the Cambodians started to be resettled in the United States, this would attract vast new numbers of people into Thailand in hopes of being resettled to the United States. So in the end, when you netted it all out, they were very much against resettlement in the United States for the Cambodians.

But you asked about the end game. I guess the end game in our minds was what, in fact, eventually happened, ten years or so later, which was that we always looked forward to the day when conditions in Cambodia would change sufficiently to allow these people to go back. Actually, I was gone from this by the time that eventually happened, and I think that when it did happen there was not too much controversy. I think people did, in fact, filter back into Cambodia, not only filter back but were taken back and assisted within Cambodia by the international organizations in a fairly peaceful way. Now a lot of other things more violent have happened since then, but I think at the time that that happened it was not so contested.

By the way, I've totally forgotten to mention another huge group of refugees-this time-who were in Thailand, and those were the Lao, up along the Lao border, large, large numbers of them as well who had fled in 1975, when the Vietnamese took over all of Indochina, and were still there. And there was a different wrinkle with them still, and that was that there was a great deal of sympathy for the Lao, particularly for the Hmong, which is a mountain tribe of Lao, who are different ethnically from the so-called lowland Lao, and who worked very closely with our Special Forces and others during the Vietnam War. And we felt that we owed them, as indeed, we did. And so we regarded them as refugees, capable of being resettled in the United States. The only problem was they didn't want to be refugees. They wanted to go back to Laos, by and large. Now many of them did come to the United States, and that was one of the problems because I guess they tended to write back the truth to the people in the camps, which was that they were having a difficult time. And so for years, people sat in those camps who could easily have been interviewed by the INS and gone to the United States. And this, too, became a subject of contention with the Thai Government: when are these people going to leave?

Q: What was the feeling-again we're talking '80-'81-about the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, that this was a sometime thing, or how did you figure that was going to play out at the time?

WRIGHT: I guess we thought it was a sometime thing, in the sense that the Vietnamese would gradually draw back some of their troops, but I imagine-I'm guessing a little bit now-that we thought that the Vietnamese would do everything they could to maintain a heavy influence over whatever government there was in Cambodia.

Q: Was there any reaching out with the Vietnamese occupiers and their collaborators in Cambodia with us or with any of the refugee groups in our dealings?

WRIGHT: I'm sure they were always trying to put on their best face for the international organizations and the voluntary agencies who worked in Cambodia. I don't think there's any doubt about that. I don't remember any instances where they could have been said to reach out to us. I think we were fairly implacable adversaries at that time and regarded as beyond the pale, although I might be wrong and there might have been instances where some probe was made.

Q: How about our embassy in Bangkok? I imagine that, in a way, they weren't very happy with the situation and you might have caught some of the brunt of the thing, of, you know, "You're screwing up our normal relations with this interesting country."

WRIGHT: This came later, I would say. During the period that I'm talking about now, Mort Abramowitz was our ambassador. Abramowitz was a decided partisan of the displaced people. There was no doubt where Abramowitz stood, and in fact, it was he who sounded the alarm to mobilize the US Government to do something about this human tragedy in the beginning. So it would be interesting to talk to him about this, but he was certainly regarded as a decided defender of the interests of these displaced people and, I presume, must therefore have been looked at with a good deal of suspicion by the Thai Government at the time.

Q: How about in Congress? You mentioned Steve Solarz. Were there others? Steve Solarz, as far as I know-I've been interviewing him and he's been off to Cambodia all the time-he's involved with the Pol Pot matter.

WRIGHT: Even now?

Q: How did you find dealing with Congress? Were you being called upon to testify and that sort of thing.

WRIGHT: I don't think I ever testified, although other people did that I wrote testimony for. And I talked to a lot of staffers. People like Solarz who felt very strongly that the United States had a humanitarian responsibility toward the people in these camps in Thailand, as well as others of them, although I haven't thought about this for a while, but there were a number of congressional delegations, particularly later, when I was in Thailand, who went to Thailand. I'm trying to think of somebody who would have been on the other side of this. It's hard to be against helping refugees, but I would say there were people-this might bear some more thought-who were not involved in this issue, and then there were people, like Solarz, who were very much involved in trying to get the United States to be a part of this humanitarian effort.

Q: Who did you report to and where did you fit in in the State Department apparatus?

WRIGHT: I reported to the refugee bureau, although we had a lot to do also with the East Asia bureau. In fact, specifically I reported to a deputy assistant secretary who was, at least, I think, for most of that time, Shep Lowman.

Q: How did you find it within the Department? You know we've been so involved in Vietnam. This is five or six years after the fall of Vietnam. Was there a tendency to say, "God, I wish this would go away," or did you find an engaged State Department ?

WRIGHT: Well, by that time, of course, although this was a big problem, it was by no means the biggest problem in the State Department . It wasn't the Vietnam War. As I say, the East Asia bureau was very much involved in this, particularly in the person of one of its deputy assistant secretaries at the time, who was John Negroponte, so I would say that within the refugee bureau this was a very large item. Up on the Seventh Floor, I doubt that it loomed nearly that large.

Q: Well, when you left this job in 1981, how did you see the thing standing? Did you see this as an open-ended problem, or did you see that there was a handle on it, did you feel?

WRIGHT: Well, again, to be honest, I don't remember what I thought, but as I look back on it, I think that we did have a lot of success. I was talking a few months ago in New York with one of the UNICEF officials that was very much involved in this. His name is Paul Altesman. And Paul at that time was a young aide to Jim Grant. Jim Grant was the very much beloved and very competent head of UNICEF during these years. And Paul was saying that from his point of view and his institution's point of view this whole effort was a tremendous success. When you think of the enormity of the job involved and even though it often didn't look like it at the time, to have received all these hundreds of thousands of people from three countries eventually into Thailand, taken care of them by and large, and then had them return either to their own countries or to third countries over however many years it was, eight or ten years probably, was really an effort that everybody involved in it could take pride in.

Q: Well, then in '81 where did you go?

WRIGHT: In '81, I went to the IO bureau, International Organizations, to be the deputy director of IO/UNP, which is UN political affairs.

Q: You were doing this from '81 to when?

WRIGHT: I'm not sure when I left there exactly because I went sideways within the bureau to be the executive assistant to the assistant secretary, and I stayed there for about nine months to a year and then I went back briefly to IO/UNP, and then, in the beginning of 1984, I became the office director for UNESCO, the office that handled UNESCO.

Q: So we might as well treat IO as a block. When did you leave that, UNESCO.

WRIGHT: I left at the end of 1984, the beginning of 1985.

Q: So, really, '81 to '85. First, with this political affairs, this should have been a very interesting time. The Reagan Administration had come in avowedly suspicious if not hostile to the United Nations. How did you find it? You there were sort of at the beginning of all that, Jeane Kirkpatrick.

WRIGHT: Yes, it was indeed hostile to the United Nations, very hostile, and I was reminded of that only a few months ago when I served during the most recent General Assembly as the senior advisor for Latin America and the Caribbean to our delegation. You know, each of the bureaus has a senior officer who goes up there for the General Assembly to help out. I went for ARA. This is, of course, a Democratic administration. Our representative to the UN is Bill Richardson, and so I was able to compare the atmosphere that exists now at US/UN to the atmosphere that existed then, and believe me, there was a world of difference. The problems are, by and large, the same. That is, we're trying to persuade the UN to get its house in order, to contain its budgets, to do away with the silly committees, to stop arguing over the past and get on with things, and so on and so on-very similar problems, but totally different atmosphere. On the one hand, in the Kirkpatrick era, you had a number of right-wing ideologues-some of them pretty competent, I'm not saying they weren't-but people who arrived at their jobs with the idea that this is an awful organization and what can we do... The idea, I think, was not so much to make it better as it was to expose what was wrong and to punish the organizations and the people involved. That was on the one hand. Now, what you have, I think, are people who see the same problems but are fundamentally in favor of the United Nations, who get very exasperated with it sometimes, but who want to see it succeed-a big difference.

Q: Well, tell me, when you were dealing with political affairs in the United Nations, what did that encompass?

WRIGHT: I was involved, in large part, with backing up our delegation to the United Nations, our mission to the United Nations, doing research on various questions, getting cleared positions from the State Department when questions arose at the United Nations for which there had to be a government-wide decisions. Now this brings up another facet of things, because Jeane Kirkpatrick, as you may remember, was no wilting violet.

Q: No.

WRIGHT: And you have a built-in bureaucratic problem with our permanent representative to the United Nations, ever since, I guess, Adlai Stevenson, and that is that, being a cabinet member, he or she far outranks the person who would normally be his or her boss, which is the assistant secretary for international organization affairs, and this was maybe doubly so during the Kirkpatrick years because she, on the one hand, was a star and a very powerful person, with a powerful mind and powerful views. And the assistant secretary for international organization affairs-I guess there were several. One was Elliot Abrams, who didn't stay very long and left. The other for most of the time there was Greg Newell, who was a bit of a phenomenon himself, in that he was, certainly on paper, not at all fitted for the job or probably for any job in the State Department. He had been an advance person for President Reagan. He was liked over at the White House, and by sheer force of his ability to maneuver and his personality, he got himself named assistant secretary for international organization affairs, a very controversial appointment. He was not a highly educated man, although he was a man with a lot of street smarts. He was a Mormon, which was very evident, which he was very proud of and from which he drew a lot of his inner strength, I think. He had a lot of people who didn't like him. There's no doubt that he, along with the others, had a right-wing agenda. But at any rate, I was talking about the relationship between the two, and there is no doubt who overshadowed whom.

Q: I take it you were sort of like an executive secretary for the UN business, I mean, getting the papers cleared, getting research done, and that sort of thing. Was that a fair description?

WRIGHT: Yes, well, I was executive assistant, and I used to travel with Greg Newell, whom I liked a lot, still like. And Newell had a series of, I think, five goals that he constantly reiterated for the bureau, which he made up hastily as he took his job and which, I guess, weren't too bad, saving money and that kind of thing. People got a little tired of hearing them, but I suppose they might have done some good. I was going to tell you something else that I had remembered. I can't think right now. But he did the usual things that a new assistant secretary would do. He traveled around to his various posts, Vienna, Rome and so on.

Q: did you have the feeling that so much depends, for an assistant secretary on how their fellow assistant secretaries and others judge them, and I would assume he would be judged lacking.

WRIGHT: That's probably true. Again, I haven't thought about this for a while. He could display a lot of strength sometimes, and I remember in one instance... I'm jumping ahead a little bit now to my job as the head of the office that handled UNESCO. Shall we do that? Shall we start to talk about that?

Q: Let's stay back a little bit. As a regular Foreign Service officer, seeing a powerful person like Jeane Kirkpatrick coming in, who had an agenda which was really going off if not 180 at least a 90° angle from sort of what had been a normal support of the United Nations, maybe somewhat lukewarm but certainly not antagonistic, and you have a Foreign Service that is basically committed to the course that's been gone over for 34 years. How did this play out. I mean, was this a problem?

WRIGHT: Yes, it was a problem, and it was a problem in a lot of the bureaus. Naturally, people who tended to work in the International Organizations Bureau are people who like international organizations, particularly the civil servants and others who have been there for a long time. And of course, they looked upon this very negatively or with a lot of foreboding. And in turn, they were looked on with a great deal of suspicion. They were looked on as the enemies. And in this, by the way, is another, I think, facet of that kind of era which you don't see now. Of course, now you have people who are partisan, but you don't have people-I don't think-going around looking for enemies who are on a different wavelength than they are. You certainly did then. I remember Greg Newell brought in a guy, whose name I can't remember right now, who was a kind of a sometime academic ideologue and turned him loose in the bureau. And he was enormously unpopular, partly because of his extreme views, partly because he was just regarded as dangerous by the people who were in the bureau, including me. And one never quite knew what he was going to come up with next. We only knew it would be bad.

Q: Well, you say "turned loose in the bureau." What did this mean?

WRIGHT: As I recall it, he was attached to Newell himself, and his job-I presume he must have had different tasks as he went along, although they were pretty amorphous-would be to... He was a speechwriter, for one thing, and he and I would often be pitted against one another. I would write a speech; he would rewrite it, and I would try to rewrite it again. So this was certainly a source of tension. And he did this with other people, too. I mean that was one of the things that he did. He wrote things for Newell.

Q: Well, the guts of the United Nations operation are votes, aren't they. Was there a radically different voting pattern, or not? Did you see that?

WRIGHT: Do you mean on our part?

Q: Yes.

WRIGHT: That's a good question. I don't know. I would expect not radically different because there were so many set pieces in the UN repertoire, say in the General Assembly, which come up every year, which we always vote against, and which we're always going to be isolated on. And I think that probably didn't change much. There were probably some different votes along the margin, but you asked an interesting question. It would be interesting to compare the two in black and white and see. But, you know, you say that they were the guts of the organization, and that's true in a sense, but they leave out much more than they reveal about any country's participation in the UN. This was brought home to me a few months ago when I was in New York and I was looking at the voting records on say the ten most important votes in our view to come up at the UN last year and looking at the ways in which our adversaries voted, as opposed to the way our friends voted. There was practically no difference, very little difference. You might have-I'm making this example up, but-you might have had, say, France or Germany voting with us seven out of the ten times and one of our worst adversaries voting with us only five out of the ten times. So that doesn't really do it, as far as explaining what various countries' roles were in the UN and how they viewed it, what they thought, and anything else. They're only a very crude and not very reliable indicator.

Q: Did you have any feeling at the time about the effect of Jeane Kirkpatrick, who did reflect the President, Ronald Reagan, so she was not a wild card; she was solidly supported by the President. Did you see any effect to America's influence in the United Nations? Did it make any effect?

WRIGHT: It's hard for me to answer that because I was not there before, so I can't give you a before and after picture. I know that she was regarded as, let's say, a lot of the other countries found her personally difficult to deal with, not for very good reason, I don't think. I think a lot, frankly, because she was a woman. And, in fact, when I went around to different countries-I made a tour through Africa one year, to try to gain support for our positions at the UN in advance of the General Assembly, as we do every year-and sitting down with various foreign ministries, that came up several times, that they were offended at being lectured to by a woman or at being treated by a woman in the same way that they probably would not have taken offense at being treated by a man. So I think there was some doubt. Whether this reduced our influence at the UN, I don't know. This is such a hard thing to judge. For example, just to make a comparison, we now have in Bill Richardson and the team under him people who are probably as supportive of the UN as any group of people you will find. They're having a hell of time up there because of the position our country has taken on its arrears. People love Bill Richardson; they hate our position. So he has a very difficult row to hoe up there.

Q: Were there any issues that were joined during this period that particularly struck you?

WRIGHT: The Falklands War occurred during this period, which had us having to choose between Argentina and Great Britain, and of course, we chose Britain. And that didn't help our relations with the Argentines and, I guess, elsewhere in Latin American.

Q: Did it really, though? I'm just wondering because the Argentineans were not at all popular in Latin America. They had to make official statements, you know-they were supporting their fellow Latin Americans-but they probably, I understand, many of them, did not wish the Argentineans well, as people and as a government.

WRIGHT: I'm sure that's right, yes. I think it complicated our relations; I don't think it did them terrible damage, because the traditional view of the Argentines is exactly that-which I think is attenuated a great deal now, but I think it was so then.

Q: What about the other bureaus? Were they coming to you? Where did the power flow? Were you-through the UN apparatus-telling them to get the government of Great Britain to get on the stick and vote our way, or were they telling us how we should? I mean, how did you feel about power?

WRIGHT: Well, in general, the bureau had very little power; Jeane Kirkpatrick had a lot of power. I can remember once being up there when Kirkpatrick and her lieutenants, Lichtenstein and Sorzano... I don't remember where we were or what the forum was, but I remember well that all of them got some kind of directive from the State Department. Of course, anything from the State Department is signed by the Secretary of State, who was Haig, I think, at that time. And so it was a "Vote this way. Haig" And one of these political appointees had the insight, "This is not from Haig; this is from some crummy bureaucrat deep in the IO bureau. We don't have to do this." And that became their attitude. It was kind of a revealing moment when they finally figured out that they weren't being instructed by the Secretary of State, they were being instructed by Joe Blow down in the basement, figuratively, of the IO bureau, and why should they do that?

Q: Were you sort of sitting back waiting to find out how our delegate was going to vote on issues that were more peripheral so we had opinions but they weren't these set pieces?

WRIGHT: I don't remember, but I think we knew most of the time how they would vote, and I suspect that often the word flowed the other way. That is, it was clear that Kirkpatrick and company wanted to vote or to way something-that's more likely where you would have a difference of opinion, in the way a statement was worded-and that became the way it was done.

Q: Were you there when, was it Lichtenstein or somebody was telling, "If you don't like us, we'll be happy to see you off at the dock and wave goodbye," I recall?

WRIGHT: Yes, one of the most famous sentences to come out of the UN during those years, one of the most popular sentences with the American people, by the way.

Q: Did that have any repercussions? Was that planned, or was that just-

WRIGHT: I don't know. I don't think it was planned. As far as I remember, Lichtenstein was interviewed and he came up with that. But I don't know whether they thought about that in advance. They probably thought about what line to take. I forget the exact incident, but it was one which they must have talked about back at US/UN and decided how to handle.

Q: When you moved over to UNICEF, what were you doing there?

WRIGHT: Well, now, I was not at UNICEF. Oh, I'm sorry, you mean UNESCO.

Q: UNESCO, I'm sorry, excuse me.

WRIGHT: Well, there, that was a very difficult year because that was the year in which we left UNESCO. At the beginning of that year, we said, if you don't do X and Y within this year, we are leaving, and at the end of that year, we left. So it was a unique period, one in which I don't think we covered ourselves with glory, one where we might well have made the wrong decision, and one which was heavily freighted politically. There's no doubt that Greg Newell saw that as an achievement. The whole right wing of the Reagan Government saw it as an achievement. We finally left an international organization. There's no doubt in my mind that Greg wanted to do that and that it would have taken a miracle on the part of UNESCO to have prevented it. Now having said that, I don't mean to imply that I thought there was nothing wrong with UNESCO. I think it was clear that there were a lot of flaws in the organization. The biggest flaw was in its leadership. It was led by a Senegalese by the name of M'bow, who ran it like a warlord and was acknowledged privately to be a huge part of the problem. We never wanted to say that because we were afraid of charges of racism, and so we had the curious situation where we were constantly talking about things that were not the real reason why the organization was not being run well. They were perhaps symptoms, but not the causes, although the counter-argument to that was, "Well, everybody knew what we meant."

Q: I had no real connection to the United Nations, but I knew M'bow was one of the problems and the major problem. I think this was in the papers and everywhere else.

WRIGHT: A lot of this, I guess, comes down to whether you think that, if you belong to an international organization and there's something about it you don't like, you should get in it and try to change it or you should say "to hell with you" and get out of it and save some money. And I think that what happened was that you had a number of people in the department who wanted to stay in UNESCO. I think that was surely true of Jerry-I can't think of his name, but he had been our ambassador in Geneva and is now a high-level aide to, I think, Mike Armacost. Armacost was, I guess, the Under Secretary for Political Affairs. I think Armacost was probably in favor of staying in UNESCO, but I guess it wasn't important enough for anybody to take on in the face of what was clearly a White House and Republican effort to do this.

Q: Well, sometimes in political life you throw some non-essential raw meat to the lions in order to get on with other business, and you have a feeling that this almost was that.

WRIGHT: Could be. I hadn't thought of it in those terms, but it would be interesting to look at the other things that were going on at that time and see if that might fit that description.

Q: What was UNESCO doing at that time, and what were you seeing as UNESCO as an instrument for doing what it should be doing?

WRIGHT: Well, first of all, it's a terribly amorphous organization. It's the UN Educational, Scientific and Communications Organization, so it's a perfect haven for fuzzy-headed people who kind of like to do good and have somebody else pay for it. At the same time, it did have some parts of it that did good work. There were some scientific programs, I think, that were regarded as good, but there were some things in it that we took terrible umbrage at. One of them had to do with its attitude and policy towards journalism, which, as I remember it, had pretty much defended "managed news" and news which would play up the development objectives of Third-World governments and call them journalism. We, rightly, were very much against that, and when that part of the organization met we had terrible fights with the people who were the majority-and should have.

I'm sorry, I've lost the-

Q: No, I was saying what were some of the things we were concerned with? The journalism one was a major issue.

WRIGHT: We were also concerned at the way the place was managed. We felt that far too much money was being spent at headquarters rather than in the field. We thought that there was much too much centralization. We thought there was much too much power in the hands of the director general to name cronies, people who were not well qualified for their jobs-that kind of thing.

Q: Were you there at the dissolution?

WRIGHT: Oh, yes.

Q: Were you yourself or others going around, America, saying the sky really is going to fall, this is going to happen? I mean, did it make any difference?

WRIGHT: No, well, oh, sure. I think everyone understood that we were very serious, and in the end we did an assessment. I've lost all the details on this, I'm afraid, but we told the organization and all the members that they have to satisfy these various criteria and make progress in these various areas, and in the end they didn't. It's a tricky question because, on the one hand, we certainly sobered everybody up by doing this, and it was probably a close call. Again, I think it probably comes down to whether you think, in an organization like this, you should stay and try to be better or say "the heck with you" and throw them to the wolves. And then, of course, a few other people left also. I think the British left the following year and I forget who else-one or two other countries left.

Q: What was the feeling? That there was no way of getting M'bow out?

WRIGHT: Yes. I'm trying to remember when his last elections was. Of course, eventually he did leave, and that was, I guess, looked upon hopefully by people who hoped we would come back. We didn't, although I think within the Clinton Administration there has been a lot of positive feeling about UNESCO and about our going back. I guess the problem now is finding the money to do it and not having any really strong partisans for going back.

Q: This is about the time you'd like to stop, isn't it? Why don't we stop now, Lacy, and we'll pick it up, in 1985 you left the UN assignment, and where did you go?

WRIGHT: I went to Thailand as the coordinator for refugee affairs.

Q: Okay, you did that and took the language before you went?

WRIGHT: That's right.

Q: We'll pick it up going on that assignment.

WRIGHT: Okay.

Q: Today is the 22nd of April, 1998. Lacy, how did you find Thai?

WRIGHT: Do you mean the language?

Q: Yes.

WRIGHT: Thai is not a terribly difficult language, at least if you know Vietnamese. They're both similar. They're both tonal languages. The writing in Thai is difficult, but speaking is about the same level of difficulty as Vietnamese. That doesn't mean it's easy, but you know from the start pretty much that it's doable. My problem was that I never had enough. I only had a certain number of weeks of Thai. That's certainly not enough. I was also pretty unhappy with the Thai instruction at FSI-they're all gone now, so I can talk about them-due to the teachers, the Thai teachers that we had, who were not very good. They had some common failings, but they were particularly bad in teachers. One, for example, spent most of his time impressing his class with his excellent English, which didn't do me much good since I already knew English and didn't need to learn any more. In retrospect, I wish I had really complained about the situation, because I did not learn as much Thai as I could have had things been different. And then when I go to Thailand, as usual in an embassy, I found myself dealing overwhelmingly with people who already spoke English, and being in the capital, being in the embassy, even though I tried hard, I never really advanced very far in Thai, which is a shame.

Q: You were in Thailand from when to when?

WRIGHT: From about June of 1985 until about June of 1987.

Q: How did you fit in. I mean, what was your title and what were you doing?

WRIGHT: My title when I first arrived was coordinator for refugee affairs, and then it got transmuted along the way to be counselor for refugee affairs. And I was in charge of all of the refugee programs, except for the ODP program, the Orderly Departure Program, from Vietnam, which was a separate entity, but when I left, my job and the head of ODP were combined into a single job, but that was not until I left. My job was to handle, first of all, all of the refugees and displaced persons who were in Thailand that we talked about before. I had another program under me which was the anti-piracy program, which in terms of manpower and money was a small program compared to the others but which was a very important one and one in which we had a lot of success, not very much due to me but due to the fact that we had-I believe he was-a US Customs officer-was it Customs or another agency? At any rate, he was terrific. Oh, he was DEA, excuse me. We had a DEA officer who had been in Thailand before, spoke excellent Thai, really knew what he was doing and, I think, single-handedly greatly reduced piracy against Vietnamese boat people. These were terrible atrocities when they occurred. And he did that by very successfully enlisting the cooperation of the police in southern Thailand and successfully prosecuting some of these pirates when they returned to land, which had never been done before. So when these guys saw that there were real consequences to raping and killing people out in the middle of the sea, they tended to stop doing it.

Q: You mentioned before you were in Thailand working with the Thai navy, which you found a very mixed bag. The first man you dealt with was fine; the second one didn't give it much priority. Was the navy element still part of this, or was it more catching them when they got to shore?

WRIGHT: I don't remember the instances that you're talking about.

Q: Yes, I may be conflating yours with Dick Gibson. I'm sorry. I was talking about Dick Gibson, who was doing that, and I've got the two together. On your part, how did you find the navy?

WRIGHT: I didn't deal very much directly with the navy, probably not at all, but I think the answer to your question -and, of course, the guy that I'm talking about did, as well as with the police-is about the same as you would get if you were talking about any Third-World governmental entity like that. A great deal depends upon the personal rapport that you can establish with them, and this guy was able to do that and he spent many an evening out drinking with these guys and getting to know them and establishing trust with them. And he did it, they say, with a lot of success. And I think that's usually the key. When you're dealing with many Third-World officials, trying to appeal to their sense of doing a good job is usually not the best way to go. You have to get to know them, and they have to get to like you, and when you ask them to do something then it becomes one friend asking another, and that's the way you get things done often.

Q: You'd been dealing with the Cambodian-Vietnamese problems for some time. Where did the Thai Government come down on refugees in '85? I'm sure it had gone through several permutations.

WRIGHT: They were, I think, suffering from compassion fatigue by that juncture, not that they had ever had too much compassion for the Vietnamese, but I think I addressed this earlier, and I don't think things changed too much. The Thai Government never liked the Vietnamese, were always worried that not only the Vietnamese but these other people would stay in their territory indefinitely, and that, above all, was what they wanted to avoid. They did not generally share our humanitarian concern about these people, although they protested that they did, and what they really wanted was to make sure that they got something out of it as long as those people were there and that they all eventually went home. That led them to adopt rather austere policies when it came to the care and the feeding and the housing of these refugees and displaced people. As I think I've said before, none of them were ever allowed out of their camps, even though in some instances, particularly with the Lao, local accommodations were reached. And this broke down somewhat, and people actually did go out to a certain degree and have jobs in the local area outside and then come back to the camps at night, and in fact, for the Lao, who were so akin to the Thai, linguistically and in other ways, we used to envision that maybe this was the way it would all end. Gradually these people would seep out, and eventually they'd all settle up there in northern Thailand and so on and so on. That never quite happened, but I guess it happened to some degree. But the Thai, as I say, wanted nothing more than for all these people eventually to leave, and they wanted to be assured that that was going to happen.

Q: What about boat people? Now we're talking about seven years or so, after the fall of South Vietnam and all. Was it a fairly steady flow out, and who were they?

WRIGHT: Yes, there were still plenty of boat people coming out. I can't give you the numbers now. They would be diminished, of course, compared with those who came out first, but there were still people landing by boat in Thailand. And in fact, one of the things that we were always on the lookout for and concerned about was that these people not be pushed away by local people when they tried to land, which would have been a violation of the Geneva agreement on refugees. When people did land like that, they were taken immediately to one of the two or three Vietnamese camps and had to stay there until it could be determined what would happen to them. And by that I mean, they would be seen, first of all, by the JVA, our Joint Volunteer Agency, which would do up a little dossier on them, and then they would be seen by the INS, and the INS would decide whether they were "real" refugees, that is, people who had fled because of a real fear of persecution, or whether they had left for some other reason, such as for economic reasons, to gain a better life somewhere else. Needless to say, the line between these two was very murky, so it really came down in very many instances to a pretty subjective decision by the INS officers, which itself was a source of a huge amount of tension. At any rate, that's what happened to people, and many of the Vietnamese did go on to the United States after that, and a number of them stayed for years and years in those camps and were eventually involuntarily repatriated to Vietnam.

Q: On my interview that I referred to before with Dick Gibson, which was an ongoing one right now, and I can't remember his time frame, but it was about that time, he was saying that they had done a sort of an informal look at who the refugees were and came to the conclusion that a significant number were what would be called "economic" refugees, but he said that he had a great deal of heat from the embassy and from the NGO's, non-governmental organizations, who were concerned with it. He said, in a way, using a good Asian term, that he was breaking their rice bowl by doing this, and he was told to cut it out. Could you talk about how this was reflected where you were? I'm sure it was a continuing thing.

WRIGHT: Yes, this was a continuing thing, and you had the predictable people lined up generally on either side of that issue. The INS people, particularly, and the Thais on one side, and the voluntary organizations, most of the people in the refugee bureau and the State Department on the other side-very difficult to try to be objective here or to try to figure out what were the proper criteria to use. For example, one of the things that a lot of people thought was if a person risked his life to come out, even if he had done that for so-called economic reasons, it would have been dangerous to send him back to Vietnam because of what he had done. So the line was far from clear; on the other hand, you had people who clearly saw things one way and one way only, and they were on both sides. I'll never forget, for example, I was out in the field once and observing the interviewing of a young Vietnamese man, probably 20 years old or so, maybe younger, and he was being interviewed by a very sympathetic JVA person, a young lady. And in these interviews, one of the ideas was to prepare them for the INS interview, which was the important one; and one of the accusations sometimes was that the JVA people would coach the applicant to say the right things. In listening to this interview, it went something like this:

And finally this poor girl got exasperated, and she said, "Well, then, why did you leave Vietnam?" And this kid came up with a brilliant answer. He said, "You don't think I was going to wait around for all those things to happen to me, do you?" But, of course, for these poor people, this was desperately serious business.

Q: Of course it was. In your job were you feeling any pressure from Washington, particularly from the Department bureau of refugee affairs or from the embassy to take one line or another?

WRIGHT: You had various people and institutions that had predictable lines, and you were always weaving around them. It was pretty hard to be objective, although if I had it to do over again, I would have tried even harder to be objective. For example, the DCM at the embassy, who was my boss, Chas Freeman, took a fairly hard line. He believed that this refugee business could only last for so long and that many of the people coming out were economic refugees, and that was his view of things. The INS, who was very hard to deal with and with whom I did not get along very well, kind of went up and down. They were always reading the tea leaves-and doing it kind of cynically, I think-and would routinely engage in trades. "Well, okay, look: you lay off of us up in this camp and let us do our work, because we think that we know what's going on there and we're going to be kind of tough, and we'll do something for you down here." And it was just about that explicit. And when I think about it, it's really awfully cynical, and I wish I'd said more about it at the time; but everybody kind of played that game.

Q: Well, I have to point out that I was in the refugee relief program in Germany, in Frankfurt, in 1955, and the INS was out there, too, and we traded bodies. "We're not going to fight you on this one if you let this one go."

WRIGHT: Right, right, I believe it.

Q: There was a rough justice.

WRIGHT: Yes, and a lot of people took the view that it was better to do that and get something, if you were on that side of the question, than to get the whole INS mad at you and have them retreat into a funk, in which they would then tend to deny everybody. I got into a dust-up with the INS in fairly short order over a matter that had become a real issue, and here we're talking about the arbitrariness of this whole effort. A certain number of the initial Cambodians who had come across in the wake of the Vietnamese invasion, if I remember them correctly, were liable for resettlement in a third country. I'm a little vague on this; now I'll have to remember more when I listen to this. But there were some thousands of them who had been interviewed, and some had been allowed to go to the United States. Most others had not. There were a number of people, voluntary agencies and others, who had taken up the cause of these people and who felt that they had been treated very unfairly, and that many more of them should have qualified for admission to the United States. We had a name for these refugees, and I can't remember what it was right now. At any rate, I brought up this issue and agitated for their being re-interviewed. Now needless to say, the INS thought this was the world's most terrible idea, but eventually it happened, and maybe about 3,000 of them were re-interviewed, and I believe that most of them were still rejected, but about 10 per cent were accepted, and those 300 or so people then did go to the United States. But I did serious damage, in this, to my relations with the INS, and particularly with the then INS director, from which I never really recovered. And if I had it to do over again, I might try to do the same thing, but I would do it much more carefully and in a different way.

Q: How did you find the-I want to call it non-governmental organizations. They had a different name then.

WRIGHT: Well, let's see. You're right, and I can't quite remember what it was, but they had a whole umbrella organization there to try to bring some coordination into the work of these hundred or so voluntary agencies.

Q: Were they running across the spectrum as far as how they dealt with the refugees, or were they for the most part, they thought their job was to take the refugees and place them in some friendly country?

WRIGHT: Not necessarily all of them, although I think that's what they tended to think. You know, in the refugee world, as you probably know, when you're a refugee, there are three possibilities for you. You can either go back to your own country, which in refugee lore is always regarded as the best solution for everybody-that is, you can go back to your country when conditions there change. You can stay in the country to which you have fled, assuming you've been accepted there and they agree to keep you. Or, and this is regarded by those who've studied this question as the worst solution, you can be accepted into a third country. Now often from the refugee's point of view that's the best solution, particularly if the third country is the United States, so... I would say that, first of all, staying in Thailand under the conditions I've described was not thought of, except in the case of the Lao probably, as a long term solution. So I guess things were divided between those who thought they ought to wait and go back to Cambodia, in the case of the Cambodians, which was the US Government position, and those who thought they should be resettled in third countries, principally the United States. And I would think that 90 per cent of the voluntary agency people would have felt that that was right, although I think there were a number of them who did not think that because, after all, there were problems in going to the United States, too, not only problems of the US absorbing them but also problems of resettlement and adjustment to a new country. That particularly turned out to be the case with the Hmong, the highland Lao, who had a very difficult time adapting to life in this country, and you may remember 10 or 15 years ago or so a number of them died mysteriously from ailments that no one ever clearly explained.

Q: Were there efforts that you were aware of, because you had the UN and everybody-this was not just limited to the United States-to work with now the united Vietnamese Government to try to resettle the refugees, bring them back?

WRIGHT: I think that was later. I don't believe that any of those kinds of efforts occurred until some years later. There were accords, and eventually a number of people did go back. I used the word involuntarily before-that's a very nasty word in the refugee world-certainly reluctantly. I guess when it's really involuntary that means you're taken bound hand and foot into the plane, and I don't know that that happened, but certainly people were put under a lot of pressure to go back. That is, they were told, "You can either stay and rot in this terrible camp in Thailand for the rest of your life, or you can go back to Vietnam." And under those circumstances, a number of people did. I think that the history of their treatment back there, though, as far as I can tell, was not too bad. Although there again you had terrible arguments between the people who believed the worst about the Vietnamese Government and the people who looked on them a little more benignly and felt that this was the right solution.

Q: You had a bunch of junior officers, I guess, working for you, didn't you?

WRIGHT: Yes, a certain number, that's right.

Q: How did you find this, because I would think that you, as a senior officer, had been around the block, knew there was the job to be done, but for particularly a younger officer, they can get emotionally involved, and in their eyes, you're part of the problem, or something. Did you run across this?

WRIGHT: I don't think that was too much of a problem, partly because some of the younger officers were not as emotionally involved in this as you might think. They had not been in the Vietnam War. To them it was a job. And I kind of think it was-it's an interesting questions, I've never thought about this before-more akin to what you would find in any country to which you sent junior officers to be consular officers. Some of them are sympathetic to the applicants, but many of them are not.

Q: I think your point is well taken, that those of us who served in Vietnam can't help but have a sense of guilt in all this. Were you married at this time?

WRIGHT: Yes, in 1985. Yes.

Q: So I was wondering, did your wife get involved, being Vietnamese?

WRIGHT: Yes, she did. She got involved in taking things, supplies and gifts, to the camps, particularly to the Vietnamese, and more than that, she got involved in visiting the Vietnamese who were unfortunate enough to find themselves in Suan Plu Prison in Bangkok, which is where the Vietnamese and others were taken who had been detained by the police outside the camps. I told you about that. So these were people who were often very sad cases, people who were even more unfortunate than the people who were in the camps. They desperately needed some supplies and needed to be cheered up a little bit. So she did a lot of that and went a fair number of times to that prison.

Q: Who was the ambassador in '85-'87 period?

WRIGHT: Let me think a second. Bill Brown.

Q: Did he have a particular set of ideas towards refugees, or was he involved in other things. How did he react to this?

WRIGHT: I believe that Brown, who was a very fine man, was personally concerned about the refugees, but he also found himself in that familiar dilemma. The more one, as an American official, the more one supported and tried to make life better for the refugees and displaced persons, the more one got into a position of conflict with the Thai Government. So his struggle was to figure out where to place this among his priorities, and he fell afoul of some of the refugee advocates by appearing to put refugees in a lower priority among the issues which we had to take up with the Thai Government than they would have liked.

Q: This was sort of the high Reagan period in the United States, the middle of the second term. Was there anything coming out of the White House or from Congress that you had to listen to the winds from that direction?

WRIGHT: I would say no, in this sense, that I think the refugee question kind of cut across party lines, in the sense that, for example, most of the refugees in this country now are Republicans. They're not refugees any more. Most of the people who came here are Republicans; they're not Democrats, although many are, but I would say the majority are Republicans. I'm not sure I can think of many instances right now, but I think it's fair to say that you had people on the right who regarded these refugees as people who had escaped from a Communist country, who wanted to come to our country and work hard and make a new life, and found that very sympathetic. So it would certainly be far from true to depict the republicans as against the refugees.

Q: Were there any developments during this '85-'87 period that we haven't touched on?

WRIGHT: One of the features of our makeup at the embassy was that you had the JVA, the Joint Voluntary Agency, which was a very strange creature, which we duplicated in the various countries, like Malaysia, Indonesia, where we had refugee operations in Southeast Asia. It was headed by one of the voluntary agencies, and that agency would have a kind of contract with the State Department to help look after the refugee population in that country, mostly by, as I say, interviewing them when they came out, preparing them for their INS interview. Because there was so much emotion and feeling with regard to refugees, I guess, and because these were organizations that tended to be in the refugee business, they did not want to be near employees of the US Government and successfully argued, at a certain point when these relationships were being formulated, that they have some autonomy. They were contractors. They were paid for by the U.S. Government—all their salaries and everything else were paid for—and yet they were able to have a relationship in which the person to whom they reported couldn't just tell them what to do. So it was a very tricky relationship, and in some ways not a very good one. It probably generally worked because they and the refugee bureau people who supervised them (in quotes) were generally of the same mind about refugees. They were in favor of treating them as well as they could and generally in favor of admitting them to the United States. But it could and did create problems from time to time because from time to time the head of the JVA would sort of let it be known that he didn't work for you. By virtue of the agreement between his agency and the United States Government, he enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy. So when it came to the interviewing of the refugees for admittance to the United States, you really had three entities who were in a kind of uneasy relationship with one another. You had the people who worked for the U.S. Government, like me; you had the JVA; and you had the INS. You had the situation, for example, in Thailand where from time to time you'd have a kind of unholy alliance between the head of the JVA and the head of the INS, who were cutting deals with one another, and with the U.S. Government person certainly not having much authority over the INS-

Q: When you say the U.S. Government, of course, INS was part of the-

WRIGHT: Yes, I shouldn't have used the word US Government. I should say State Department. The State Department person certainly not being able to control the INS and not really being able to control the JVA either. So it was a job that called for a great deal of diplomacy and managerial ability and all that. And again, if I had it to do over, there are a lot of things I would do differently.

Q: For example.

WRIGHT: I think, for one thing, I would have gotten off to a different relationship with the INS. It would still not have been easy, because the INS officials were difficult people to do this with, and one had a tendency to bend over backwards to be friendly with them, sort of to get them on your side, and that sometimes worked, sometimes didn't work. So I think the trick would have been, in general, to be as nice as possible to them in one's personal relations but at the same time as tough as you thought you could be with regard to the policy and try to make those two tracks run. As I say, my relations with them were greatly complicated over this initial business about the re-interviewing of the Cambodians.

Q: Well, you left there in '87.

WRIGHT: '87, yes.

Q: And has there been any particular change by that time, the flow in or out?

WRIGHT: Again, I don't know the numbers, but I would think that during that time the flow would have gradually diminished. There was still a trickle of people coming out of Cambodia, but not very many; and I guess there was a trickle of people escaping the camps and going back in, but not very many. One of the things-and I guess I mentioned this before, but I might again because it was a big problem-the security situation in the camps was something that we spent a huge amount of time on, trying to bring more law and order into the camps, working often with the Thais, which was not easy because the Thais tended either to let people fight it out-that's kind of a guess, I probably shouldn't say that, but there tended to be a lot of latitude given to the Thais who were running these camps, and sometimes these were good people, and sometimes they were not so good, and they had a lot of power. So this was a constant concern. We were always trying to figure out better ways to do this so that people could live more secure lives. I think that that gradually improved, although it was something that we were constantly concerned about.

Q: Well, then, in '87, whither?

WRIGHT: In '87, I went to Mexico, of all places.

Q: That was a different view. You were in Mexico from '87 to when?

WRIGHT: Not very long. From '87 to about April of '88.

Q: What were you doing there?

WRIGHT: I was the deputy political counselor.

Q: What brought you to Mexico? You had served in a Spanish country before?

WRIGHT: No, never.

Q: Was there any rationale for this?

WRIGHT: Yes, it was the only job I could get.

Q: Okay.

WRIGHT: No, it was not a place that I would have ever thought of going, but I had a heck of a time finding a job that I wanted-in fact, I didn't find a job that I wanted-and this came up and kind of looked like the thing that best appealed to what I was used to doing, and so I took it. I remember that there were a couple of other things at the time. One was going back to the anti-terrorism coordinator's office, which I thought about and decided not to do. One was I was offered a chance to stay in Bangkok at the embassy and be the narcotics coordinator-he was leaving-and I decided not to do that. So I went to Mexico.

Q: Well, obviously it didn't last. What happened?

WRIGHT: The reason it didn't last is because I got a better offer, and after I'd been there for nine months or so, a cable came out from ARA, the Latin America bureau, advertising a suddenly vacant DCM-ship in Trinidad. And the DCM was Roger Gamble, who called me in and said, "Would you like to apply for this?" And so I did. Several other people, I think, at our mission did, and I suppose that maybe a total of 10 people or so from our hemisphere responded, and I got that job.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about the time. What was your view of our embassy in Mexico. I mean this was a whole new world for you. How did you find the diplomatic effort there, from your perspective?

WRIGHT: Well, it was a huge embassy, first of all, and that was one feature. Our relations with Mexico, of course, have always been tricky and sensitive. Our ambassador at that point was a man named Charles Pilliod, who had been the head of either Goodyear or B. F. Goodrich-Goodyear, I think-tough guy, a guy who made no pretense of trying to regard the embassy as a family or even get to know very many people. His method of management was to get to know four or five people in the embassy and talk to them and they'd talk to other people. At the same time, he was a guy who, I expect, took his job very seriously, didn't spend half his time away at the beaches or anything like that. He worked hard. Although he became known as probably a bit too much of an advocate for the Mexican Government, he in fact was awfully tough on them, and I seem to remember that he routinely picked up the phone and talked to the foreign minister and gave him hell about one thing or another-in a fairly nice way, but still. So he was a tough guy. I'm trying to think of some of the issues that were between us at the time. You still had the aftermath of the Camarena case, Kiki Camarena, the DEA agent who was murdered in Guadalajara. That's still poisoning our relations. We still had a big drug effort. And then all the other stresses and strains that we normally have.

So it was a pretty hardworking place. In the political section, the political counselor was a guy named Andy Tongs, who was a good guy, hard worker. We had a section of about six or seven people, so I supervised about four people under Andy. We had a very large consular section, as you can imagine, a lot of junior officers, and one of the things that I did there and which I became successful at, was to involve our consular officers in political reporting. Most of them were anxious to do this, so we would figure out projects which they were to do, and they would do them with a little bit of help from me, and then we would send out their effort. And a number of them, four or five of them probably, did this and did it very well. It's kind of interesting comparing this with my time in Brazil, when the attitude of junior officers, at least in our experience there, seemed to have changed. The ambassador at one point went down-this was only two years ago-to visit Rio, which has a horrible visa load-it's probably the third or fourth visa-issuing post in the world; São Paulo is one notch above it-suggesting that the junior officers, as part of their professional development, might want in their spare time to do some reporting. And he said they looked at him like he was crazy. And their attitude was, "Forget it. I'm going home and going to bed" Or going home and doing something else. Which could be a kind of shift in the demeanor of junior officers, who may now tend to see their job more as a job, less as a calling or vocation. On the other hand, the people in Brazil, junior officers who did this kind of work, really had a terribly difficult job to do, so we mustn't be too hard on them. But I would imagine that working in the consular section in Mexico was no cakewalk either.

Q: What was your particular slice of the political section pie?

WRIGHT: I guess I probably had just about everything, not that I did everything but that the people that I supervised did everything. One of the things that happened while I was there was the election of President Salinas, so we were in charge of reporting on the elections. We didn't report on them very well, I must say, because we really underestimated the public dissatisfaction.

The PRI, as I'm sure you know- I think it's called the Institutional Revolutionary Party or something like that-but at any rate, it's by far the largest party in Mexico and the one that's run things for many, many decades and thought by most people to be tired and corrupt and so on, but very much in power. And every president came from the PRI, including Salinas. Salinas was very much our guy in the sense that we certainly didn't intervene in any elections in any way, but we felt that he was a good modern person, an economist, a younger man, who would be good for Mexico. And then, of course, we stepped out of the way. What happened was that he almost didn't win the election, despite the massive support behind him, and may well have lost the election. He barely squeaked by in the end with something a little bit over 50 per cent, which was an unheard-of total for a PRI candidate to get. They usually got 80 or 90 per cent, I would think.

And this was interesting. Well, a couple of things were interesting. As we reported during the course of the election, I would say we were under a certain amount of pressure from Ambassador Pilliod to report that the PRI was doing okay, doing pretty well, and I remember that every day as I came to work-I used to take a taxi to work-I would ask the taxi driver, who was always different, who he was going to vote for. I don't believe anyone ever said he was going to vote for Salinas. Maybe one did. Now I should have taken this as indicative of something, but I think I thought, and most of us thought, well, when push comes to shove, yes, the other guys will get some points, get some votes, but the PRI still has such a massive apparatus that this won't make a whole lot of difference. Well, what happened was this. The Mexican Government had new election computers for this election, so they were saying for the election that, by gosh, by the night of the election people will have the results. Well, the night of the election came-no results. The next day dawned-no results. Evening fell-no results. Next day happened-no results. And it became clear from our sources that the PRI was in pandemonium over there trying to figure out what to do about these horrible results that were coming in. And eventually, as I said, when they were announced, Salinas had won by a little bit over 50 per cent, but I think it doesn't take a Rhodes Scholar to speculate that maybe he didn't win at all. And then, the rest is history, as we say.

Q: Were you getting indications from the consulates elsewhere and all, polls and all this, because we'd been reporting, of course, for years on the Mexican elections, and it had always been assumed that the PRI would win one way or another, and it was such a predictable thing? Have we gotten lazy at sort of getting down and looking at the system?

WRIGHT: I don't remember. There certainly were polls, and I can't remember now what they were. I think I'm right in saying that I don't think any poll predicted what in fact happened, although I might be wrong. I really don't remember. And I don't know that any of our consulates predicted anything differently. I do remember that our USIS officer in charge, whose name was Sally Grooms, who in fact there became Sally Grooms Cowal-she got married there-and was a very bright officer, questioned this at the time, said, "Are you sure we're really right here?" So her instincts were good, as they usually were. By the way, at the same time, when we did report what we felt about the situation, we got a certain amount of unhappiness down from the Ambassador, who thought that even though we were not depicting the situation as badly as it turned out for Salinas, he thought we were being, as it was, too pessimistic, and not being a wilting violet, he let that be known.

Q: Why do you think the Ambassador had taken this stand?

WRIGHT: I think he probably genuinely shared the perception that I just described as that of many of us, that is, that, yes, there was a lot of criticism of government, but when push came to shove, when people actually voted, the PRI apparatus was so strong that the results would be predictable. He probably felt that, and then he probably also felt that if we report differently we're going to get everybody excited in Washington. One, we'll get them excited, and two, we'll probably turn out to be wrong. I imagine both of those things were in his mind.

Q: Now was there ever any debate at all anywhere about, say, saying the election may have been won by fraud. You know, in other countries we might have raised this subject. Was this sort of a no-no?

WRIGHT: No. It's an interesting questions, isn't it? I don't believe it ever occurred to anybody to have a US official stand up and wonder aloud whether these elections were fair or not. At the same time, I think it was perfectly evident to anybody with half a brain that the elections might have been fraudulent.

Q: It is interesting, because in lots of other countries we would have been in the forefront of questioning.

WRIGHT: Well, and I think that had the question been raised, the answer from our government would have been crystal clear: No, we are not going to stand up and say this-first of all, because the guy who one was a guy who we thought would be good for Mexico-that's number one-and secondly, to have done that would have introduced into our relations with Mexico and into our relations with the government which was surely going to run Mexico for the next six years an intolerable discord.

Q: Well, then, off to Trinidad. You were in Trinidad from '88 to when?

WRIGHT: Let me just say one thing about Mexico. I regret that we didn't spend more time in Mexico because it's such an important country for us. There too, I wish I had had more time to get to learn Spanish well. I did travel a bit around the country, which was very interesting, but I wish I had been able to spend more time there. At the same time, for my wife, Jackie, the pollution there was a big problem.

Q: Oh, yes.

WRIGHT: A very big problem, not so much for me, but for many people it was.

Q: And the height.

WRIGHT: And the height. And by the way, during the time that we were there-and this was 10 years ago-many embassies had special provisions for their employees because of the pollution. Some embassies did not send people with children there. Some embassies gave people off one day a week-various things like that.

Q: I was wondering also, here you were, the odd man out, not an ARA specialist, all of a sudden put into the political section of our most important country in Latin America. I was wondering whether you felt a little bit out of it, and also at the same time had a certain amount of questions because here was an important election and essentially the embassy got it wrong, which makes you wonder, you know, what sort of club am I getting into? Did you have any of those feelings, either exclusion or wondering what this was all about?

WRIGHT: Exclusion, I don't think so. I got along very amicably with all the people that I worked with there. Of course, I was relatively unfamiliar with the scene there, needless to say, but I worked hard, and I think I caught up to a large degree, and I think by the time I left I was pretty conversant with the situation, the parties, the politics and so on. The fact that we did not do as well as we could have, predicting the winner of the election, is certainly something I noticed, although I think almost everybody was taken by surprise. I don't recall that there was any finger-pointing at the end, although it was a good lesson, and one lesson is that you need to not just go by the past but be prepared for things to change.

Q: Talk to the taxicab drivers.

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: Well, you were in Trinidad from '88 to when?

WRIGHT: '91.

Q: The Ambassador there was-

WRIGHT: -Charles Gargano. He was the person who hired me. In fact, before I got the job, I was invited back to talk to him, and I was invited back by Gene Scassa. Gene was then the executive director in ARA. Gene very much helped me get that job, I think, because he took a look at all the bidders, and Gargano trusted him a lot, liked him, I think, and Gene said-I think he said this, he told me- "Well, you ought to take Lacy Wright." So he invited me back, we had a talk, and he said yes.

So then I went out. I actually got to Trinidad a few days before he did, and the former Ambassador had already left. It was being run by a chargé¹/₂, Bob Dickerson. And so I overlapped a few days with Dickerson, and then he left and Gargano arrived.

Q: What was Gargano's background?

WRIGHT: Gargano was a head of a New York City construction company. He had done very well. He was also active in Republican politics. He had been deputy secretary of transportation-I guess it must have been under Reagan-for a while and then gone back to New York. Subsequently, after Trinidad, he was the head of the New York State committee to re-elect the President, on behalf of President Bush, who, of course, did not win. I'm sure he was active in the campaign to elect Governor Pataki, and today he's one of Pataki's closest advisers, and he is the head of the Empire State Development Corporation, which is the New York State economic development arm.

Q: When you arrived in Trinidad in 1988, what was the situation there? How would you describe the political-economic situation?

WRIGHT: In 1988, the NAR Party-I can't remember what the acronym stands for-was in power. The NAR Party in the last election had obliterated the party which had been in power for many years, the PNM, the People's Nationalist Movement.

Q: That was Eric Williams's party?

WRIGHT: That was Eric Williams's party, that's right, which was a black party. Trinidad, as you may know, comprises two principal ethnic groups, the Indians and the blacks, each of which has maybe 45 per cent or so of the population, the rest comprising people of European descent, Trinidadian-Chinese descent and I guess a few other odds and ends. But the big groups are the Indians and the blacks. PNM is a black party; the NAR's boast and effort and achievement, for a while, was to have a party which was not based solely on racial considerations but represented both of the two major racial groups. The prime minister was A. N. R. Robinson, who today, by the way, is the President of Trinidad.

Economically, Trinidad was living in relatively hard times. Trinidad is, I guess, alone among the Caribbean Islands to have oil and gas. And in their heyday-this is the early '70's-Trinidad had had the third highest per capita income in the hemisphere. So there was a huge amount of wealth then, which was not, unfortunately, used always in the best way. For example, the Trinidadians built a huge hospital complex outside of Port-of-Spain, which then when the money ran out went largely unused-a horrible amount of money wasted. They tried to build a medical school, to which, of course, nobody would come, and so on. But at any rate, now they were living in much reduced circumstances, with the price of oil having gone down dramatically in the interim. However, probably the problems that they would later have with drugs had not matured. Violence was a problem, but less of a problem than it became later. And all in all, Trinidad was a delightful place to be, a wonderful place to be.

Q: During this 1988-91 period, what were American interests?

WRIGHT: Drugs and commerce. We had big oil companies there. We had Amoco, which drew out about half of Trinidad's oil. We had other large companies which were either there or were angling to go there and drill, like Mobil. So for a very small country, there was a lot of American investment in Trinidad.

Q: Was there concern about nationalization of oil things that crop up?

WRIGHT: I think that had pretty much occurred already. You see, there are two Trinidadian oil entities which had been takeovers of other companies, but that was already done. I don't think any one envisioned that there would be further nationalizations at that point.

Q: Was there concern at this time about Cuba? Did Cuba play any role?

WRIGHT: I don't think particularly. I think that played a bit more of a role in our relations with Jamaica later, but no, I would say not. Now the big event that occurred while I was in Trinidad was the attempted coup of mid-1990, in which a bunch of Black Muslims, called Muslimin, took over both the radio station and the entire Parliament with the prime minister and much of his cabinet inside and held them for five or six days. That was by far the most dramatic event ever to have occurred in Trinidad, and it was one which really shook the country to its foundations. The prime minister was brutalized during this takeover. Selwyn Richardson, the minister of defense, was shot in the leg, very badly treated. By the way, he was later assassinated, about two or three years later. One person among the hostages died of a heart attack, but outside even more damage took place. A fair amount of the downtown was burned down by looters, who took advantage of the situation to wreak havoc. Overall, about 20 people were killed during the whole thing. So it was a very serious event, and I must say that the reaction of a lot of the Trinidadians, particularly to the prime minister, I found shocking. The prime minister really behaved heroically during the time that this was going on. He was told at one point to go out and-I think it was-to talk to the police and tell them to lay off, which he refused to do. But he got no sympathy from most of the people, certainly from the common people, and instead of being treated like a hero when it was all over, he was simply the object of lots of criticism for various things. Probably some of this had to do with his personality. He's kind of an erudite man who speaks like one. There's nothing common about him at all, and this clearly worked to his disadvantage as a politician. But I see that he's been rehabilitated because within the last year, I think, he was elected President of Trinidad, which I was happy to see.

Q: Where were these black Muslims coming from?

WRIGHT: They were a very tiny sliver of the population, although I think they mined a kind of rich lode of resentment among the poorer people in Port-of-Spain, witness the burning down of part of the city. They had no real power. They came from a group which had long been well known in Trinidad. They had a kind of mosque which they had built. By they, I mean maybe a hundred or so people, maybe a few followers. They had squatted on land, and the government was in a constant quandary as to whether to throw them off of it. They had just taken over some land that belonged to the government and built on it. And so Selwyn Richardson, minister of national security, whom I've mentioned-it was his job to figure out how to deal with them. And eventually, he did not throw them off this land, but he made them stop building, earning their wrath.

They had a bunch of grievances against the government-some of them, I guess, valid, and most of them not. The way this happened, however, it could never have happened had they not received guns from guess where. The United States of America. They had a guy, it turned out afterwards, who was the number two person in the organization. His name was Bilal, I think. He had taken a trip to Miami. He had made contact with an individual who was able to get him a cache of weaponry. This was sent down to Trinidad disguised as something else-this was all dissected, so it was very well known at a certain point-stashed in some other kind of container. There was a sympathetic customs guy who had been paid off to look the other way when it came in. He did. The stuff was taken off. And these were the weapons that were used in this coup.

It also turned out that-this is very ironic-I think it was the FBI, one of our law enforcement organizations had been onto this guy, the American party, who was in Miami. They were in fact trailing him. They knew he was up to something. They knew he was buying weapons. They knew he was going to do no good with them. But they didn't know where he was going to send them. They knew he was going to send them somewhere. But he eluded them long enough to do what he did. It also turned out that the Trinidadian Government knew that this guy Bilal had gone to Miami-I think this is right, I'm a little hazy on this-and had put in a request to the FBI to find out who he had been meeting with. The FBI treated this, as far as I can tell, as a kind of routine request. They threw it into a big hopper with lots of other requests, and they finally got him an answer about a week after the coup occurred. And had they done this faster, this would not have occurred. And this, by the way, became an issue in the Trinidadian papers afterwards. But anyway, just one more kind of dramatic example of how the Americans, with their nutty penchant for having firearms, not only kill themselves at a tremendous rate but export this violence to other countries as well.

Q: Well, when this coup took place-I mean, obviously we're very sensitive to things of this nature happening in the Caribbean-was there any thought that we might send experts for taking care of this matter or SWAT teams or anything like that, or were we just bystanders?

WRIGHT: One of the things that happened was that a lot of people thought-and hoped-that we would rush in and save the day. One of the things that occurred was this. This happened right after the Fourth of July. And at the fourth of July we had had in Trinidad the USS Eisenhower, our aircraft carrier-

Q: Brand new one.

WRIGHT: -which was massive, and we had had our Fourth of July party on this ship-which is another story I'll tell you about. There were rumors going around that the USS Eisenhower had turned around and was steaming back to Port-of-Spain, which, of course, was not true. There were also other rumors that we had landed at the airport. There were rumors flying everywhere during this period.

One of the main factors in the resolution of the coup was the staunchness of the Trinidadian military. Trinidad, being a small country, doesn't have a big military, but it has one, and it has a regiment. Their highest ranking officer is a brigadier general, who was a colonel at the time, I think, and his name was Ralph Brown. And Ralph Brown deserves a huge amount of the credit for saving Trinidad, and he did it by being absolutely tough, at a time when there were probably people within the police who wanted to, well, let me back up. The Muslimin were being communicated with all the time by the government, which had set up a kind of command center, and one of the first things that they did, after a day or so, was to cut off all the telephones to these guys except one. First of all, they found out that these guys were calling all over the world, particularly from the radio station, and talking to the newspapers and everything. So anyway, since they owned the telephone system that was no problem. They got in there and fixed it so the Muslimin could talk to only one person, and that was the government spokesman. So that really contributed to a sense of isolation on their part. Then they were still making a lot of demands, and there were people who wanted to give in to some of these demands. There were emissaries that went in, church people and so on. And it was Ralph Brown and his troops that said, "Forget it. We are not giving in to any of these things." And since they were the guys on the Trinidadian side with the most guns, they were the guys who prevailed. And in the end, Ralph Brown's message to the Muslimin was, "You guys either come out and surrender, or we're going to kill you." And they thought that over for a while, and they came out and surrendered after about six days.

Q: Were we looking around and seeing what this meant? I mean, were we seeing any hand elsewhere, or was it pretty clear at the beginning what it was?

WRIGHT: Well, yes and no. I think mostly it's clear it was a homegrown thing, but these guys did have links to-I believe it was-Iraq. And in fact, a number of the calls that went out from the radio station on the part of the Muslimin-I don't think it was Iran, I think it was Iraq. So clearly, they did have links with these guys. It turned out that some of the Muslimin had been there for training of various kinds, so they were certainly abetted by other terrorists.

Q: Well, this is at a time when had the Gulf War between the United States and its allies and Iraq taken place at this point, or was it still-

WRIGHT: I guess so. Well, let's see. When did it take place?

Q: Well, wait, because it was over in May, I think, or April.

WRIGHT: Of '90?

Q: Of '90, yes, and we're talking about after the Fourth of July. But still, there were repercussions. After this was over did we get involved in trying to explain the gun role and all this? I mean, did this cause problems?

WRIGHT: It did cause problems, and it died down after a while and went away. But as I recall, I think the prime minister said-I guess had to say-that he was going to demand an explanation of what had happened. In fact, I remember he did say that. He was going to demand an explanation of what had gone wrong in our police liaison, so that flared up for a while and then went away.

Q: Well, you were mentioning the visit of the Eisenhower. Could you explain this? That was probably at that time our most modern aircraft carrier.

WRIGHT: Well, this is pretty humorous. Ambassador Gargano worked very hard, as ambassadors tend to do in these instances, to get the Eisenhower there so that we could have our Fourth of July party on it. And he was successful, and it came. It was so huge, however, that it could not dock so that it had to anchor about five miles out. So you could only reach it by boat. So it came and stayed for two or three days, and on one of those nights we had our Fourth of July Party. In order for the guests to reach the boat, they had to be taken there, of course. And so we chartered a ferry boat, the same kind of ferry boat that routinely goes from Trinidad to Tobago. And you can picture these things-it has some inside cabins and it would hold maybe a thousand people or so. This was the event of the decade, I guess, and there was tremendous pressure to get tickets-invitations, I should say-and we were besieged with people who were not on the list and who wanted to be, and there was all kinds of chicanery going on, people showing up without invitations, presuming they would get in anyway, which they usually did. So we had an elaborate setup to take the invitations and funnel people onto the boat, and all that worked pretty well. And in the morning, by the way, they had had-if you'll pardon the expression-a dry run. They had sent out the ferry, and it had to link up-it kind of fit in the back. There was a kind of gangway that let down in back, and this had to fit into a kind of slot in the boat and then people just walked right from one onto the other. And they had tried this out earlier in the day, and it had worked and so on. So all kinds of planning, months of planning, had gone into this, and now it was working and in progress. So we all got onto the boat-all 500 or 700 people, however many it was-and we were drinking and having a great time, and after about 45 minutes we got out to the carrier. We could not link up with it. The tides, which had obtained earlier in the day, had shifted, and so getting these two to mesh with one another time after time proved impossible. So there we were, all of these people out there again and again trying to do this and again and again failing. By now it was getting late, of course, and one of the people among the guests was the head of the port authority. It was a woman. And so at a certain point she asked the Ambassador to come into her private quarters, and I think I went with him. I guess I went with him. And she said, "Mr. Ambassador, I think we're just going to have to give up and go back. This is awful. I'm horribly embarrassed, a terrible thing, but I just don't see-I think we have to give up." And Gargano didn't let a second go by. He said, "We are not giving up. We are going to have this party tonight."

And sure enough, we finally made it. It took about two hours. And one of the things I remember is we finally got on there-I guess about 10 p.m. or so-on this massive ship and I went up onto this massive deck where there was a band there and so on. And as usual with these things, the Ambassador was supposed to say something, and he had a speech that I had written for him. And a few days before, President Bush had been in a certain situation with a speech, and he had very dramatically torn his speech in two and said, "I'm not going to use this speech. I'm going to talk to you by myself." And that's probably what put this into Gargano's mind, although it was probably a good idea. He stood up and ripped up my speech and said, "We're not going to have a speech tonight."

Q: Well, how about tourism? Tourism was not much of a factor in Trinidad, was it?

WRIGHT: Not a huge factor, but it was a subject of constant debate, and the debate was between those who wanted tourists and saw it as something that Trinidad, for its economic well-being, ought to have, on the one hand, and on the other hand, those who didn't want to do any of the things that you needed to do to accommodate tourists and saw them as sully their way of life, and all that stuff. So one of the things that one heard constantly was "environmental tourism." I think a lot of people in Trinidad felt comfortable with that. They thought, these are higher kinds of beings, these environmental tourists, and we have what it takes to attract them, and that's the niche that we ought to be trying to fill. And indeed, Trinidad does have some rare things to show people. And so there was a certain amount of that, but I think that probably everyone agreed, both there and later in Jamaica, that environmental tourism might be nice, but people do not come in great numbers to watch birds. So there was some of it.

Q: Well, also, as a people, I think I've heard that Trinidadians aren't terribly receptive to tourists. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I have it mixed up with another island. I mean, it's not a warm, friendly, fuzzy feeling when you get there.

WRIGHT: That could be. The Trinidadians, on the other hand, are especially when compared with the Barbadians or even the Jamaicans, are a very outgoing and fun-loving people. But I think you're right. Don't forget, when it comes to serving tourists, there is a cultural problem here. I mean, there was slavery and being black and all that. And that's not absent from this equation. So you do not have, and I suppose you never will have, the kind of service in these islands that one encounters, say, in Thailand, where I think they have the best hotels and the best service in the world. So this is different.

You know, if I could introduce a new subject, V. S. Naipaul is a Trinidadian.

Q: Oh, yes, a famous author.

WRIGHT: Famous author.

Q: Indian-Trinidadian author.

WRIGHT: Yes. And I was fortunate enough to get to meet him several times while I was there. He had not often come to Trinidad. In fact, he was on the outs with the Trinidadians because of what he had written about them as, indeed, he is on the outs with everybody about whom he writes.

Q: Including India.

WRIGHT: Especially India. I usually conceive of the world as an ever-shrinking place for V. S. Naipaul because after he writes about a place he usually can't go back to it. And he's now written about a lot of places. He is regarded-I guess rightly-as a man who's very full of himself, a man who-maybe takes himself very seriously is a better way to put it-and who has pretty trenchant views about almost everything. He's lived almost all of his life in London. He's been long married, married to an English woman, a white woman, and those who know him-I know some people who know him very well-say that he can be hard to take sometimes. The times that I saw him, I must say, he was very gracious to me. In particular, one night I was invited alone-Jackie was not there, she was out of the country-to a very small dinner with Naipaul by a friend of ours by the name of Grace Phelps, a black Trinidadian woman. And Grace had a dinner for about six people, including V. S. Naipaul, including one of Naipaul's sisters and her daughter, Naipaul's niece. There was also a guy called Selby Wooding, whose father was a famous lawyer in Trinidad, a longtime friend of Naipaul, and one of the former wives of-who's the guy who won the Nobel Prize from St. Lucia a few years ago?

Q: It's not ringing a bell right now.

WRIGHT: I'll think of it in a minute, but anyway, this was one of his former wives. Walcott, Derek Walcott. And it was a very interesting evening. Naipaul talked about a lot of things, talked about the British, talked about the colonial period, talked about-who's the author who about 10 years or so ago wrote a book which Muslims found offensive?

Q: Oh, yes. Salman Rushdie.

WRIGHT: Salman Rushdie.

Q: He's an Indian.

WRIGHT: That's right, yes. We talked about him. But I remember we talked about the British and about how bad the British were during the colonial period, and there were a lot of negative comments about them. And finally, Naipaul's niece, who was a very young woman, maybe 20, 21, who had not said anything, piped up, and she said, "Well, gosh. I don't know what you're talking about. I was in London last year, and people were so nice to me, I had such a nice time." And Naipaul turned and looked at her and said, "My dear, that shows you have not understood a word we have been saying to you."

Also I remember at another point, Margaret Walcott was talking about American TV and what drivel it was and complaining that that's all they had to watch because that's all that was shown down there. And I remember that Naipaul's sister, whose name I can't think of right now, turned to her and said, "Well, stop complaining. You do what I do. You turn it off."

But Naipaul also talked about Rushdie, whom he obviously detests, and he said, "You know, Rushdie's not in any danger. He's not in any more danger than you or I. He loves all this attention." And apparently Rushdie had panned one of Naipaul's books once, so he had that against him. He had called him a tool of the CIA, I believe, than which, I guess, there is nothing worse that can be said about a human being in the world.

Q: Ayatollah Khomeini, during the late '80's, had put a-what is it-a fatwa, or whatever it is, an order out-

WRIGHT: A murder order.

Q: -a murder order on Rushdie because of his book concerning Mohammed, and so he's been under protective custody ever since.

WRIGHT: Yes. Well, it was interesting that only several days after that, after Naipaul had fulminated about Rushdie, Rushdie appeared in a bookstore in downtown London signing copies of his books. So maybe he was right.

Q: Were there any particular problems with Trinidad during the time, outside of the fact that we were supplying guns to the wrong people and that sort of thing?

WRIGHT: I don't think so. As I say, Trinidad is a delightful place, full of interesting people, interesting characters, a well educated people, as compared, say, with the Jamaicans, partially because much richer, partially because, they say, Eric Williams made education a priority and funneled a lot of money into it. A lot of people are educated still in England, although that's changing. Full of interesting people and full of wonderful music.

Q: I was going to ask. I always think about Lord Invader and the calypso music that during the '40's was very popular.

WRIGHT: Well, the Trinidadian has several kinds of music which are really wonderful. First of all it has the steel band, which it invented. Trinidadians invented the steel drum. It's theirs. And when you have a steel band of maybe a hundred pieces, it's a marvelous thing. They have calypso, which is uniquely theirs, which is great stuff, as you've said, and there are a whole new round of calypso songs created every year for the carnival. And so every year it's new, and every year there are some marvelous songs that come out of it. And then they have "soca" music, of which the name means a combination of soul and calypso. And this, too, is really unique to Trinidad, and now to the Caribbean because it's spread all over there. The greatest of the calypso singers, I think, is Sparrow, whose real name is, improbably, Francisco Slinger, and he is still around and has been pretty much since the Second World War, and his stuff is just terrific. You know, I remember at one point while we were in Trinidad, we were visited by Colin Powell, who was then just leaving his job in the NSC, and before he came down we sent up a cable saying is there anything particular, special, that General Powell would like to do while he is here in Trinidad? And we got back a message which said, "Yes, General Powell would like to buy some Sparrow records." So he certainly had heard of Sparrow.

Q: Colin Powell was from Jamaica, along with Barbara Watson and some of the other people who have been involved in American government.

WRIGHT: That's right.

Q: Well, why don't we stop at this point. We're in 1991, and what happened in 1991?

WRIGHT: In 1991, I went to Jamaica.

Q: As DCM.

WRIGHT: As DCM also.

Q: All right, and so we'll pick it up at that point.

Q: Today is the 13th of August, 1998. You were in Jamaica from when to when?

WRIGHT: '91 to '95, almost exactly four years.

Q: Jamaica has often been a troubled place because some political ambassadors have gone there and were sort of not quite sure what an ambassador would do. I mean they were often more social than not, but they were real problems. Could you describe how you got the job as a DCM and who was your ambassador, and then the situation in Jamaica in 1991, and then we can move on?

WRIGHT: I got the job primarily through the support of Sally Cowal, who was then the deputy assistant secretary in ARA who was responsible for the Caribbean. She recommended me to the then ambassador, whose name was Glen Holden. Holden was and is a very wealthy Californian, a friend of Ronald Reagan, a friend of George Bush, a man who made a fortune in insurance, and he had just lost his then DCM because of disagreements between them, and so he was looking for someone new. Sally recommended me. I don't know how many other applicants there were-I know there were some-and I went through a long series of correspondences with Holden, in which he asked me a number of questions to which I responded. The whole process took several months, but in the end he accepted me as his DCM, and I went there directly from Trinidad in April of 1991.

Q: Obviously you were sounding the corridors to find out what the dispute had been between the other DCM and the Ambassador, just to get a feel for the situation. How would you describe that?

WRIGHT: My gosh, it never occurred to me to wonder about that.

Q: Ha, ha! A note to the transcriber to put down "Laughter and raised eyebrows" on both our parts.

WRIGHT: Yes, of course I looked deeply into the matter. The then DCM, whom I did not know at that time but came to know later, was an economic officer, and this was his first DCM-ship. I believe that several things went wrong. I believe that there was not enough communication between the two. The economic officer went off and did things-this is what it appears to me, I must add-which he was familiar with, talking about economic policy and Jamaica's role in that and in our overall economic policy toward the Caribbean, not always, it seems, coordinating with the Ambassador. And I think that that was the general problem, that is, there was kind of a growing rift between the two. One has to remember that when you have a political ambassador, that person usually doesn't know what his role is, and he doesn't know what his deputy's role is, therefore. So there's a period during which those things have to get sorted out. There's also, or can be, a certain amount of suspicion on the part of a political ambassador vis-à-vis his DCM, who may think that he is trying to encroach on the ambassador's territory. This happens all the time. And so there might have been some of that. Anyway, it's unfortunate that it didn't work out for the person involved, who stayed about a year and whom I have come to know later as quite a good guy and a serious person. But those are the kinds of things that happen in our service.

Q: Can you talk about what was the situation vis-à-vis the United States but also the political situation on the ground in Jamaica in 1991, when you arrived there?

WRIGHT: Well, you have in Jamaica a country with some serious issues with the United States. You have, first of all, a number of Jamaicans who live in this country, and some people are fond of saying that they are either very good or very bad. There are some marvelous Jamaicans here, some of whom have become famous, like Colin Powell-

Q: Barbara Watson.

WRIGHT: -Barbara Watson and others, many who don't become famous but who are marvelous citizens of our country. And then, at the other end of the spectrum, you have a whole group of very violent criminals, who do a great deal of damage in our country. So you have both. And the people at the bottom end of the spectrum also cause bilateral difficulties with our country. For example, we exercise our right every year to deport a number of Jamaicans back to Jamaica. These are often people who are released from prison, and we put them on the plane and send them back there. This, during my time there, reached a total of maybe close to a thousand people a year.

Q: Oh, boy.

WRIGHT: And Jamaica, under international law, has to take these people back. But first of all, they don't like it, naturally, because it's causing them and their society increased problems, and they sometimes accuse us of sending back people, number one, who sometimes they contend are not Jamaican citizens, or who may be technically Jamaican citizens but who arrived in the United States so young that they were really formed in the United States and so, it is said, their criminal behavior is really our fault, and not Jamaica's. That is a debate that went on during the time that I was there. We once did a statistical analysis of some groups of these people who were sent back, and I must say, we did not find very many who arrived in the United States at age two and then became violent criminals. Most of them arrived much later, although there were some who fit into the first category. At any rate, this is one of the issues.

Q: I must say, during this period of time, I was here in Washington, and the papers would make reference again and again to Jamaican gangs who would come in and work from New York down to Norfolk and sort of up and down the Atlantic corridor. They would say "Jamaican Gangs" and then you would have, you know, "Ten People in an Apartment Slaughtered." I haven't heard that much any more, but that was very much in the newspapers during this particular time when you were there.

WRIGHT: Well, I remember maybe one or two instances of that. I don't know that that-the particular way you've described it-was a continuing feature of these gangs, but there's no doubt that they exist, and there's a tremendous symbiosis in travel between gangs in the US and the same gangs, with the same names, in Jamaica. There's another interesting feature here, and that is that the gangs in Jamaica are generally linked with one of the two political parties in Jamaica. This is a feature of Jamaican political life, which it's hard for us to comprehend. And I can't really think of any parallel anywhere else in the world, but these over the course of the past two or three decades, Jamaican criminal gangs became affiliated with one of the political parties. And one of the things that pops up from time to time is one of the two most renowned Jamaican leaders of the last several decades-and those are two, Edward Seaga and Michael Manley-being caught in a photo somewhere, at some fund-raising event or some other kind of public event, with a bunch of very dubious characters. Seaga, in particular, whose constituency was, and is today, one of the most abject and difficult and violence-ridden parts of Kingston, was often accused of having used these gangs literally to attack partisans of the other side. And the same kind of charges were made against the Manley people. So probably neither side has its hands clean in this matter, and both of them are guilty of having dealt with and used and accepted the violent services of these criminal gangs.

Q: Well, did we try to tell the Immigration Service to cool it or not to send as many, or did we sort of accept the heat from the Jamaican Government?

WRIGHT: The latter. We never tried to influence our own authorities in that way. We explained to the Jamaicans as best we could why this was within our rights and tried to clear up some of the misconceptions. Another problem between us, by the way, similar in nature, was that of extradition. Because of the frequent travel back and forth of people who committed crimes in the United States, they would often end up back in Jamaica. And there were some really clamorous cases of people who were extradited or whom we wanted extradited that occurred while I was there. One of them-I can't think of the man's name, although I will in the written record-was a man who was wanted, I believe, for murder in the United States, a Jamaican. He was extradited, and no sooner was he extradited than his lawyers and others popped up and said that this was done illegally, that the laws of Jamaica had not been followed, and I believe that our case turned on an appeal that they contended was still in progress with the Privy Council in London when the removal of the person to the United States occurred. And I don't remember whether this was totally clear. I remember, at the time, that we believed that we were right. Well, first of all, if any mistake had occurred, it would have been on the part of the Jamaican Government; it would not have been on our part. So there's no question of that. But the Jamaican Government was so concerned about this public accusation and about what they feared the reaction was starting to be. I was charged^{1/2} at the time, and I was called in by the minister of national security and literally asked if we would send him back to Jamaica, which I duly transmitted to Washington, and you can imagine the attitude of the Justice Department to such a request. Their response was "no way, Jos^{1/2}, are we sending this guy back to Jamaica." And so this was a request that was repeated to us several times over the coming weeks, that we never sent back, and it faded away.

Another time, or perhaps it was the same time-you know, in extradition, when a requesting country asks for someone to be extradited, it must say exactly on what charge, where it will be-it has to be very specific. So you can't get the guy back to your country and then try him on something else, as you know. And in this case, the person was then tried in another jurisdiction and for a slightly different crime, and this brought protests from the Jamaicans. I believe we could show that there were actually two requests made, the Jamaicans acted on one, we acted on the other-again, I'm not sure if it was totally clear which side was in the right and which side was in the wrong. I think, from a moral point of view, there's no reason to feel sorry for the person in question. Whichever court he was tried on, he richly deserved what he got. And I think the Jamaicans privately were very happy to be rid of him. But again, it's one of those kinds of questions that come up, behind which there's often a lot of nationalistic sentiment.

Q: How did Ambassador Glen Holden operate? How long was he there, and how did he operate, and how did you two work together?

WRIGHT: He was there for, I guess, almost two years while I was there. Ambassador Holden first of all got off to bit of a rocky start-this was before I came on the scene-but even before he arrived in Jamaica he made some remarks in a speech, which I never read and really don't know the nature of, remarks that were taken badly by Jamaicans. I think that he may have not been as carefully talked to by the State Department during this period-that might have been part of it. But at any rate, he said things which irritated them. So this meant that when he arrived he had this to overcome. Another thing that he had to overcome was that he was a very wealthy man, so he was susceptible to those kinds of accusations, those kinds of resentments. For example, I'm told that he spent about \$500,000 of his own money to refurbish the residence. And he brought down his own armored car, which he drove around in. So all those things were the kind of things that can, if someone wants to be critical, breed criticism and resentment. I would say, however, by the time that he left, he was well liked. I think by then, in a number of ways, he had shown that he really was very fond of Jamaica, that he was willing to put his money, both in a literal sense and in a figurative sense, where his mouth was. And he had become friendly with a number of important Jamaicans, including people like Michael Manley and others. And so I believe that by the time he left he was appreciated. He came back once during the time that I was chargé, after he had left. He was invited back by the Jamaican Government when the Queen and her husband visited Jamaica. He was invited back because he had made some significant donations to the restoration of the governor-general's residence.

Q: I imagine that immigration, running the consular section and all, must have been a considerable burden. In fact, this has gotten some of our ambassadors into trouble, because they did not respond very well to the hordes of people that came in and all. How did the immigration thing work while you were there?

WRIGHT: Well, the consular section was a very busy one, very difficult job. We had about a 50 per cent rejection rate, very high. We were constantly being hit with various kinds of difficulties in that area. It was a difficult job for the junior officers that had to do it, and there were always about 10 or so of them there. They felt under a tremendous amount of pressure, particularly because they sometimes had to take their work home with them, in the sense that in public they would be recognized as consular officers, so that you would call them up at their homes or badger them on the streets or things like this, making life more unpleasant than it would have been otherwise. There were also, of course, hordes of people who called various of us in the embassy, probably me mostly, to get them visas, intervene on behalf of somebody.

Q: These were Americans who wanted, usually, servants, wasn't it?

WRIGHT: No, I wouldn't say so. I'm sure there were some of those. By the way, I don't mean to imply at all that people who called us were supporting something dubious. But the people who called us were often people we knew and who knew also how difficult it was to get an American visa or who had been importuned by somebody that wanted a visa, therefore had to be seen to be doing something for them, though often they were of this nature. The applicant himself or herself, his or her case might not look particularly convincing to a consular officer, but the person was calling, perhaps an employer, perhaps a friend, a politician, to say, "Look, I know so-and-so. I know their family. I know their situation. I know they're going to come back, and here's why." And I think when the situation fits that kind of description, you ought to take it seriously, because after all, what you're trying to do is not exclude everybody; what you're trying to do is make the right decision. And if somebody comes along whom you trust and purports to shed light on a situation that you, of course, know little about, and if you trust that person, that's something that ought to be considered. So it always seemed to me that these were, on the face of it, legitimate interventions on the part of people that ought to be used to help make a good decision.

Now it's interesting-you know about this better than anybody-that you have certain consular officers who are absolutely determined that nobody is going to influence them, and who regard anybody's call to them, including that of the Ambassador, as at least an implicit interference in their affairs. You also have, however, a legitimate area for participation by other people, first of all, of the kind that I've described, and secondly, I think, when a very important person in the country calls you up and says this is really important to me that this happen, that's something that any ambassador ought to take into account. If the foreign minister calls him up and says, "Look, I don't ask you for many favors, but I want one, and here's what it is," I think that our broader foreign policy interests dictate that that request be seriously considered. And sometimes you have a consular officer or consuls general who recognize that and sometimes they don't.

Q: Well, on the consular side, was this sort of-I won't say a running battle, but was this a theme that kind of ran throughout the time that you were there, with these requests and the varying responses of consular officers and requests and that sort of thing?

WRIGHT: The visa requests were certainly a constant theme. I would not say that we in the front office had a lot of problems of this kind with the consular people. I think that, by and large, the people who were there, both the junior officers and their supervisors, had good heads on their shoulders and could tell the difference between a shoddy case and one that required some extra thinking.

Q: While we're on the consular side, what about crime and protection of Americans and also the staff? Was this a problem?

WRIGHT: Yes, there was a problem. For example, while we were there the French military attaché and a visitor from France were murdered in the man's living room, in his house. Terrible crime. We had, I think, three of our guards murdered while I was there, including two who were actually on duty. We had some very severe cases of American tourists, one in which a man alone traveling in Jamaica was brutally murdered and his body weighted down and thrown into the sea and very probably eaten by sharks, and having to deal with this poor man's family. So these were very difficult cases, and there were two incumbents of the American citizens' services job while I was there, and these poor guys had to deal with the families in these kinds of situations, and they were really gut-wrenching. So yes, there was a lot of crime, and it was a constant problem for us.

One way in which it became a problem, especially between our countries, was in the issuance of what was then the "Travel Advisory." As you know, it's since been changed. But the travel advisory was something which was put out at that time on an ad hoc basis and when there was reason, anywhere in the world, to warn American visitors against a particular situation. And we issued a travel advisory on Jamaica during that time. Again, I guess I was out of town, I think, and someone else had to deal with this for about a day until I got back, but I think I was nonetheless the chargé at the time. And we issued such a travel advisory, and the Jamaican Government really went bonkers because Jamaica, of course, depends heavily on its tourism industry for its national sustenance. Jamaica's two big foreign exchange earners are bauxite and tourism, and most of their foreign exchange comes from those two sources. So the government feared that this would have a severe impact on their tourism, and they were highly exercised about it. And they called us in and said, "How could you do this?" and "Aren't we friends?" and "What are you thinking about?" and "Why didn't you tell us you were going to do this?" and so on and so on. So this was a bit of a mini-crisis in our relations.

Q: Well, how did it work out?

WRIGHT: We, of course, defended our travel advisory. In those days you replaced one travel advisory with another, if you wanted to, and I'll have to do some more recollecting about this, but I think that after a certain period we were able to soften it; but more important, I would say, our travel advisory did not seem to have a big effect on the numbers of people who went to Jamaica, and I think that probably both they and we overestimated the influence that a travel advisory had. In fact, I would say that overall, I believe, that Jamaica, given sporadically the kinds of crimes that have occurred there, and I don't want to exaggerate them because they don't occur every day, but given the several high-profile crimes that occurred there, has, I believe, been very lucky that their tourism from the United States has not been more severely affected.

Q: You were there during '92; Clinton was elected, and that I assume had brought another political ambassador.

WRIGHT: That's correct. Ambassador Holden left shortly after the inauguration, having stayed on a bit longer than most other ambassadors did, but not too much longer, a couple of months, I think, but then, fortunately for me, it took a long time to appoint another ambassador. The first person appointed was a black woman politician, whose name I'll think of in a minute. It took them a while to appoint her, but they did. She eventually dropped out of her own accord because, she said, of her eyesight, which was not very good, and she feared that she would not be up to the demands of the job. This was Shirley Chisholm, from New York.

Q: Oh, yes, a former Congressional representative.

WRIGHT: Yes, and I guess the first woman and the only black woman to run for her party's nomination for the presidency. During this period I did come up and see her once, to get to meet her. I met her at the Hyatt Hotel near the Congress, where there was some kind of a black convention going on, and it was very instructive for me because this diminutive woman was obviously held in huge esteem by all the people there. My talk with her was interrupted constantly by people coming up to her and paying their obeisance.

Well, anyway, she did drop out, and then it took a very long time to appoint another person, and that really surprises me. I would have thought there would be no dearth of people wishing to go to Jamaica as ambassador.

Q: Did someone arrive before you left?

WRIGHT: Yes, and Gary Cooper, who was a black man who became the first black American ambassador to Jamaica, and he arrived about six months before I left.

Q: What was his background?

WRIGHT: It was varied. He was a Marine Corps Reserve general. He had founded and run a black-owned bank in Alabama. He had been an Alabama state legislator. He had been, I think, assistant secretary of the army, and I think he had another Pentagon job. So he had a number of arrows in his sling. His sister is or was married to Mr. Cafritz, here in Washington, a very influential and wealthy family, by marriage.

There were only about three or maybe four bauxite operations in Jamaica. They were all large. And there were, I think, three American companies there: Kaiser, Alcoa. I believe there was one Canadian company, and there was a national company. And there were, therefore, some American resident managers, and there were, of course, labor negotiations and labor disputes. The company's position always was, in the matter of wage negotiations, that they had to pay on the basis of productivity. The Jamaicans would argue that "You're paying so-and-so up in Canada X amount an hour. We're producing the same stuff. You should pay us the same." The company's position always was, "Yes, but their productivity is three times as great as yours." So this was a constant battle, and needless to say, these matters reached very high levels in the government because of the importance nationally of the bauxite revenue.

I'm trying to think of what happened in the one that I got slightly involved in. It was resolved. The company didn't leave, but there were veiled threats that if they couldn't reach an agreement they couldn't sustain their operation. An agreement was always reached.

Q: Well, now, could you talk about our dealings with the government. Who was the prime minister at the time. As I recall, we had a very rocky relationship with Manley, when he was in power at various times, but during this time, where did we sort of stand with the various leaders?

WRIGHT: Well, by this time, Manley was in his second prime-ministership, and he was a very much changed animal. Now how much of that was a change of conviction and how much of it was a tactical change, I think they were both. I think Manley did change his views about socialism. I think he did become convinced that a lot of aspects of socialism didn't work, that Jamaica did need foreign investment, and all that, companies did need to behave like businesses, and so on. So I think a lot of his thinking truly did change; on the other hand, on certain things he never changed. I'm thinking primarily of his stand on Cuba. He always believed that we were terribly wrong in the way that we dealt with Castro's Cuba, and that never changed, even though, again, tactically, he greatly played down, during his second term, Jamaica's relations with Cuba. For example, there was a Cuban ambassador to Jamaica, who had a very small mission, however. There was never, during Manley's time, a resident Jamaican ambassador in Cuba. They had relations. There was a Jamaican ambassador, but he rarely went to Cuba, and he had other duties in the foreign ministry in Kingston. There were no visits between the two. I think Manley must have listened very carefully to what we were saying during his campaign, and he must have taken the very calculated decision that the United States is a lot more important to me than Cuba is. But I can remember, I had, while I was chargé, probably two or three luncheons with Manley, in which I invited him to our residence, and we had various members of the country team there, five or six people, and Manley, just Manley. And I remember saying to him the first time, "Mr. Manley, we thought we would make the sides even here: we would have six of us and one of you." Manley was a fantastic character, though. He was, I believe, the most brilliant extemporaneous English speaker that I've ever heard. He was a man with a great sense of humor, a man of huge range of interests. He had written one or two books, for example, about cricket. He was into everything. He was also a tremendous-legendary, I should say-womanizer, who was at that time with his... In fact, he was married while I was there, again, to Glynn Manley, who is now his widow. But he was larger than life in many ways, and I will never forget that at one of these luncheons he really unloaded on us about Cuba and about what a horrible botched up job we had made of our relations with Castro.

Q: What were American interests during this time? We had the end of the Bush Administration and the beginning of the Clinton Administration. Did we have any major issues? I guess the whole Communist thing, which was always something there earlier on, that had died. People could be right, left or indifferent, and it didn't make us that much of a problem at this time.

WRIGHT: Yes, I think that's right, and rabid socialism was pretty much dead by then. There really were not very many ideological differences between the parties, and in fact, it's kind of interesting that Seaga, during our time there, was probably more in favor of government ownership of certain parts of the economy than Manley's government was. So that is true. These differences had largely disappeared. One interest-not an abiding interest, but something that came up all of a sudden-provided us a chance to get much closer to Jamaica, or Jamaica to get much closer to us, and that was the trouble in Haiti, when we forced out the leader there and reinstalled-I shouldn't use that horrible word-assisted in the return of President Aristide. During that time, as you remember, there was a huge outflow, out-migration, by sea of Haitians, and this caused us to have to really devise a policy for dealing with this, and as you may remember, we had our coast guard and navy intercept people at sea rather than allowing them to come into Florida. This was a controversial policy at the time, and one in which we needed both some political cover and some real help. And Jamaica kind of surprisingly stepped forward. So this was by far the most significant thing professionally that happened while I was there. Jamaica stepped forward and agreed, first of all, to participate in the force that went into Haiti in order to bring about the removal of I can't think of his name now-General whatever-his-name-was. First of all, they agreed to participate; they helped us a great deal in persuading other Caribbean countries to participate; and they allowed us to use Kingston harbor to emplace ships to interview Haitian migrants for acceptance as refugees into the United States. And all of those required some heavy decision making on the part of the Jamaican Governments, and so in that instance Jamaica really earned the gratitude of the United States, and that was a very hectic and active time for us. I was the chargé d'affaires during all this period. It also meant that we had at least two visits by Strobe Talbott while I was there.

Q: Who was Under Secretary of State.

WRIGHT: Under Secretary of State. And the whole thing there really went very well, and we were, as I say, extremely grateful to the Jamaicans for their assistance during this period.

Q: One last question that I have on this, and that is on, during this time, the role of the narcotics trade.

WRIGHT: Jamaica, first of all, grows marijuana, and so our narcotics assistance unit was engaged in trying to encourage the Jamaicans to destroy marijuana and assist them to do so, and we had a DEA office there.

Q: Drug Enforcement Agency.

WRIGHT: A Drug Enforcement Agency office, which had about three people in it, which is a fairly decent-sized DEA office, and they worked with the Jamaican police and the Jamaican drug squad within the police to try to catch traffickers, and they did catch some. We were not very successful in seeing traffickers either prosecuted or convicted in Jamaica, and this was always a weak part of our efforts. We were engaged through AID in trying to assist Jamaica to upgrade its court system with the idea and the hope that well, first of all it's a good thing to do in itself-but with the hope that it would assist in the prosecution of drug cases. One of the problems was not so much that drug cases were badly handled but that the entire system was extremely slow, was cumbersome, was one in which judges routinely did not behave very forcefully, so that defense lawyers had a relatively easy time of it in arguing for delays and that kind of thing, which disrupted cases, from our point of view. So on that score, we were not very successful. We were probably more successful in the case of marijuana eradication, although that gradually became, in our overall policy, less a matter of importance and urgency than stopping the cocaine trade.

Q: Well, wasn't marijuana or this type of hemp called ganja or something like that that played quite a role in one aspect of Jamaican culture?

WRIGHT: Oh, absolutely. Ganja is just marijuana. That's what it is. That's what Jamaicans call it. Yes, and of course, you have Bob Marley. Bob Marley, by the way, I think, is probably, posthumously, the best known popular musician in the world. Everywhere you go, all over the world, people who've never heard of Elvis Presley or the Beatles all know Bob Marley, so Marley's influence is just tremendous, I think hard to exaggerate. And Marley and all of the people in that culture, of course, were highly identified with marijuana, and one of the results of this is that a lot of people, Americans, tourists, young people, go down to Jamaica to do drugs. And I think some of them probably think that it's okay to do drugs in Jamaica because of all they've heard about it, and one of the things that we constantly had to deal with were a high number of Americans arrested at the airport for drug possession. And the Jamaicans really went after this with a lot of enthusiasm. And so at given times we had maybe a couple hundred Americans, couriers, in jail in Jamaica for drug possession.

Q: What were conditions like and how did you work it with the prisoners?

WRIGHT: I never myself visited any of these prisoners in jail. I don't think it was awful. I think there were jails in Jamaica that were awful, but I don't believe that these people were in them. In fact, I have the recollection now that some of these people regarded being in jail for six months in Jamaica as part of the cost of doing business. On the other hand, you had other really sad cases of young people talked into or cajoled into being a courier, with the promise of some money and a vacation in Jamaica, who ended up in jail to the horrible consternation of their parents, and all kinds of efforts made to get them out. We had both kinds of people. But it was clear to us that the people who were running these couriers and, by the way, who were often willing to pay a fine to get them out, regarded the losing some of them from time to time as one of their costs of doing business.

Q: Were there any other issues particularly during this time?

WRIGHT: Oh, we signed a bilateral investment treaty while I was there, which helped out in the treatment given to American investors and companies there. Let me think.

Q: Hurricanes? Natural disasters?

WRIGHT: No, the great hurricane occurred about two years before I came there, and that really was a disaster, and it caused a huge amount of devastation-tore the roof off my house, by the way. It was all back in by the time I got there.

Well, the BCCI scandal occurred while I was there.

Q: Could you explain what the BCCI was?

WRIGHT: Well, let's see. The Bank of Commerce and something International, I guess. BCCI was an international bank which in about 1991 or so was discovered to be involved in all kinds of fraudulent activities and over most of the world was closed down, over all the world, I guess. And there was a branch in Jamaica. Actually the Jamaicans claimed at the time that their BCCI bank, because of the strength of their own banking system, no legitimate clients lost their money because of what happened. However, about five years later, right after I had left, the whole Jamaican banking system pretty much came unglued, and there was a general bank scandal in Jamaica, in which it was shown that several of the major banks in Jamaica had been involved in very dubious, or lax, if not fraudulent, loan activities, and several banks were closed down and taken over by the government. And so Jamaica has had its share now of banking problems.

Q: Well, in '95 you left, and where did you go?

WRIGHT: I went to Brazil, also as DCM.

Q: And you were in Brazil from '95 to-

WRIGHT: '97. I was there two years.

Q: How did you get that job?

WRIGHT: Well, by the time I left Jamaica, partially, I think, because of the Haitian matter and the way that the Jamaicans and, I guess, the embassy had performed, my stock was fairly high in ARA, so I think I pretty much could almost have had my pick of the jobs that were open at that point. In fact, I had a couple of other offers to be DCM's in embassies. What I went after, actually, was not this job but was another job in Brazil, and that was consul general in São Paulo. It turned out that the ambassador, Mel Levitsky, had really three jobs which he considered to be about at the same level, and he had all of them in mind when he offered me any of them, and those were consuls general in São Paulo and Rio and the DCM-ship. Well, my chances of going to São Paulo went up in smoke when Melissa Wells decided that she wanted to go to São Paulo. Melissa had been ambassador a couple of times. She was, it was thought, coming to her last assignment, and she decided that for family reasons-that is, her son lives in São Paulo-that she would like to have her last post there. And once she decided that, that was that. So that job vanished, but I then switched my sights and I was chosen by Mel Levitsky to go there as his deputy.

Q: What was the situation in Brazil during this two year period that you were there?

WRIGHT: Well, it was a pretty good situation in the sense that Fernando Henrique Cardoso was, still is, president. He had been elected pretty much on the strength of his plan to save the local currency, called the Real Plan, in which he had founded a new currency, pegged it pretty much in the beginning to the US dollar, and then did everything possible to defend it while he was minister of finance, and did end the very high inflation from which Brazil had suffered for a long time. So it brought that all to a stop, and that lasted, it guess, from about 1993, when it started, and it's still going strong. I think inflation this year in Brazil will be about seven per cent; it probably used to be about that much per day.

And Cardoso not only did that but he instituted a number of other economic and social reforms. He himself is a man of real stature, a man who had made a career for himself as an academic before becoming a politician and who is personally irreproachable, who has lived in a number of countries, speaks three or four different languages fluently, including English, of course, and who, for the first time in a long time, maybe for the first time ever, has provided the Brazilians with a president who has real respect internationally.

Q: How did Mel Levitsky, who's a regular Foreign Service officer, use you?

WRIGHT: First of all, when I went there, I knew little about Brazil. I'd never been there before, so I stayed, I would say, in large part within the embassy and looked to the administration there. Naturally I did a certain number of things outside, too, but I would say that, more than some other assignments, I spent a lot of my time on administration of the embassy. Mel Levitsky, on the other hand, knew all the issues between our countries backwards and forwards. He didn't need any help in those areas at all. So I would say that generally that was the division of labor.

Q: I've never served in Brazil. I understand that São Paulo is becoming more important in contrast to Rio as a post. You, as the DCM and managing it, did you see a development like that?

WRIGHT: Well, I didn't see anything develop during my time there, but certainly, from our point of view, yes, São Paulo is a more important place. Rio is still a very important city, but it's one which I wouldn't call it a shell of its former self, but it's lost a certain amount of the pizzazz that it had as São Paulo has become more and more an economic powerhouse. You know, when you stop to think that, I think, the state of São Paulo or maybe it's the city has a larger economy than all of Chile, you begin to get some idea of the enormous size and sophistication of that area.

Q: Well, looking at Brazil, I mean, you hadn't been in Brazil before, and this is the colossus to the south. But it has been going through, you know, almost from the beginning, has never quite lived up to what it should be. How did Brazil strike you?

WRIGHT: Well, what you're referring to has been captured in an aphorism, which is "Brazil is the country of the future, and always will be." I think, yes, that may have changed. Probably many of the reforms that have been introduced are irreversible. Privatization, for example. Just the other day, a part of Brazil's national telecommunications company was auctioned off for \$18.8 billion, much of it to MCI, so the whole telecommunications system will probably in the end bring in, I don't know, \$30 or 40 billion to Brazil, and once they privatize it, they'll have a terrific telecommunications system, by the way, which they certainly don't have now. So that's one example of a very important infrastructure area which is being transformed in Brazil to the great benefit of the national treasury, as well as the citizens. So in other areas, in the nuclear area, we used to regard Brazil as a kind of bad boy of South America, along with Argentina, always fiddling around with things that they shouldn't be. That's all a thing of the past. Human rights-there are still horrible human rights travesties-travesties is not the right word-incidents in Brazil, but I'm convinced that the government is serious about human rights. They have good people in charge in this area in Brasilia who are very much trying to do the right thing. It's going to take a while longer, but they're moving in the right direction and trying very hard to cope with that situation. Probably Brazil's most serious long-term problem is education. They have a very poor primary and secondary educational system, but they also have a terrific minister of education, who is making big changes in that area, so as you look around the landscape, even though they still have very big problems-they have a horrible income distribution in Brazil, which dovetails with their horrible education system-all that having been said, things are moving in a very good direction.

Q: Did you find any sort of tension between the United States and Brazil at this point? From time to time, for most of the time, there have been-not like Mexico and the United States, but still it's this "We're big, we're grand, we'll do it our way." And it sort of put us off. How do things stand?

WRIGHT: Oh, absolutely. And I suppose the most dramatic and constant way in which this manifested itself was in our consular operations, because for a while there we were constantly being accused by somebody or other of unfair, biased, nasty treatment at the consular window. For a while it became almost comical, and these accusations of bad and unfair treatment... There are two things. One is not getting your visa-that's unfair treatment because he should have gotten his visa-and secondly, bad treatment, where "I not only didn't get my visa; they insulted me." And this was mixed with the racial question, because most, I guess, of the people that turned up like this were black, and so we were accused of being racist. Now, in a country which doesn't have a very good record, in our view, with regard to racism, but which thinks it does, this was a pretty galling accusation to have to face for our consular officers. So for a while there, it was almost every week somebody new would pop up in the newspapers with some variation of this kind of accusation. So it was a difficult period in that sense.

Q: What about the Clinton Administration that had been in power now for about three years of so, a couple of years when you got there. Of course, we had problems all over the world, and I assume Latin America wasn't very influential-I mean, there wasn't much interest in this in the Clinton Administration. Or am I wrong?

WRIGHT: Well, I think you're a bit wrong. For one thing, Clinton did a good thing in appointing Mack McLarty as his special envoy to Latin America. McLarty did a kind of low-key but, I think, effective job of going around and stroking people and letting them know that they had a line through him to the White House, and I think this worked. Meanwhile, the Brazilians themselves think that they have a good line to the White House via a good relationship between Cardoso and President Clinton. For example, President Cardoso was invited only about two months ago, in June, I believe, when he was on his way to the special session on drugs at the UN, to have dinner and spend the night at Camp David, supposedly only the second leader in the entire Clinton Administration to have been given that honor. So when I, shortly after that, talked to one of the senior people at the Brazilian Embassy, he really made a point of saying how pleased they were at that. So I think in political circles, the Brazilians believe that they enjoy a privileged relationship with President Clinton.

Q: During the time you were there, did we try to use our good relations with Brazil to further some policy, either world policy or Latin American policy?

WRIGHT: We did use these relations with Brazil in the question of the Peru-Ecuador conflict. We, along with Brazil and Argentina and Chile, I think-

Q: 1942, I think.

WRIGHT: Yes, it's been going on for a while, but broke into hostilities a few years ago, border dispute. There are these four guarantor countries, of which we and Brazil are two. So Brazil has been influential in that. On an official basis, Brazil was very helpful in keeping in line the Paraguayans, about two years ago, when there was question of a possible coup attempt in Paraguay by General Oviedo. Paraguay, of course, is right on Brazil's border. And the Brazilians let it be known to General Oviedo that they would not look kindly on a coup by him or anybody else. And this was a departure for the Brazilians, which like to portray themselves as very much staying out of other people's business, and a very good departure, in our view.

Q: Well, is there anything else we should cover, do you think, in Brazil?

WRIGHT: I will say, with regard to Ambassador Mel Levitsky, that serving with him really illustrated to me in a way that nothing else ever had how singular a contribution a career ambassador can make in an important country. He was, first of all, a very intelligent, very tough, very knowledgeable man, but a man also who knew the Department and Washington backwards and forwards. He knew how embassies were supposed to work backwards and forwards and took an interest in every aspect. And it's been my experience that political ambassadors, who generally have been very successful people-otherwise they would not be ambassadors-first of all, don't know how embassies work and are always struggling to learn and tend, I think, to settle down on one or two or three or five aspects of things and pretty much have to let the rest go. And so that's one of the big differences in having a career ambassador. And I think that Mel Levitsky performed superbly in every aspect of running a large mission like this, and my only regret is that I didn't serve under somebody like that earlier in my career.

Q: Well, why don't we stop at this point? So I assume you retired then after this.

WRIGHT: Yes, I retired after Brazil and have come back now to Washington.

Q: Very good.

End of interview